

**FRAGMENTS OF TERROR:
MEMORIES AND NARRATIVES OF FORMER
INSURGENTS IN SOUTHERN SRI LANKA**

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been entirely composed by me and is my own original work with acknowledgement of other sources, and that the work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed

Date

Abstract

How do people who have participated in extensive violence against the state and members of their community, understand and reflect on their experiences? What meanings do they attach to violence, and how do they go on to reformulate their lives and deal with the consequences of their actions in its aftermath? These are among the key questions that this thesis considers. Anchored in a little-known violent period that took place in southern Sri Lanka in the late 1980s, known locally simply as ‘the Terror’ (*Bheeshanaya*), this ethnography of political violence analyses the memories and narratives of those who have engaged in violence. It explores how violence is negotiated and lived with in the aftermath and its implications for the self and sociality. As such, this study is concerned with how people mediate and articulate discomfiting memories of violence, in a post-terror context of silence and fear, where justice and reconciliation are lacking. Through the accounts of people who have participated in violence, this thesis provides rich insight into the consequences of violence, and further highlights the flawed nature of one-dimensional ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ binaries generally assumed in studies of violence, emphasising instead the ambiguity that marks the experience of violence.

This thesis is based on 14 months of fieldwork carried out primarily with former insurgents in southern Sri Lanka. For balance and to maximise representation in what remains deeply contested terrain, their accounts are set against the stories of people who did not directly engage in violence, but whose lives were nevertheless touched by the Terror. This thesis argues that for those who have participated in violence, the mediation of its memory is an on-going ethical exercise. It finds that former insurgents remember, give meaning to, and live with, their violent pasts in ethical terms. Remembering violence is morally tendentious and carries significant implications for the self and sociality in the present. Recreating life after terror involves finding an ethical framework to deal with violence, and entails ongoing efforts to allocate moral responsibility for it. This thesis contends that as much as the violent past is kept alive in the present as an ethical issue, moral accountability for it remains un-reconciled and in a constant state of flux. It shows overall the narratives

of former insurgents to be contradictory and convoluted, highlighting the ambivalent nature of memory and lived experience of violence. Moreover, it argues that for those who have participated in violence, life in the aftermath is about finding ways of living with one's violent past, rather than 'healing' or 'moving on' from it.

Dedication

For all those who were killed and disappeared in Sri Lanka's *Bheeshanaya*,
and for those who continue to live with its memories.

Acknowledgments

This thesis is the result of the support, guidance, patience, and help given to me by many people over the past four years. The greatest thanks must go to those in Sri Lanka who placed their trust in me and shared their stories with me. And to those who went out of their way to help me find people to participate in this research. I can never repay the generosity, friendship, and kindness they showed me. What I learned from them has changed the way in which I see the world. They cannot be named here, but without them this thesis would simply not exist.

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Glossary of Acronyms and Sinhala Terms

ahinsaka : innocent, naive

apē kollo : our boys

avabōdaya : understanding, awareness, knowledge

avanka : honest, trustworthy, having integrity

avastavādi : opportunistic

ayya : older brother

bhaya : fear

bheeshanaya : terror

daksa : talented

darunu : dangerous, harsh, thuggish

dharma, dhamma : the teachings of the Buddha

duka, dukkha : suffering, sadness, sorrow

duwa : daughter

gama : village

hartāl : unofficial strike or curfew

hita : mind, heart

ILPA : Indo-Lanka Peace Accord

IPKF : Indian Peace Keeping Force

jātiya : ‘ethnic group’, ‘race’, type, caste

JVP : Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/People’s Liberation Front

kalabala kālaya : period of chaos, period of disturbance

karma : natural law of moral causation (cause and effect) according to Buddhism

LTTE : Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

malli : younger brother

nangi : younger sister

nirvāna, nibbāna : Buddhist enlightenment or liberation, freedom from rebirth

PA : People's Alliance

paligānīma : revenge

pav : sin, demerit, wrongful act of negative karma

pin : merit, good karma

pirit : Buddhist ritual chanting (usually for protection)

prārthanā : religious wish, religious aspiration

pudgalika : private, personal

putā : son

rālla : herd

sangha : the Buddhist monastic order

SLFP : Sri Lanka Freedom Party

taruna : youth

taruna asahanaya : youth unrest

tarunakama : youthfulness

tatvaya : social status, situation, standing

UF : United Front

UNP : United National Party

vadakāgāraya : torture chamber

visvāsaya : trust

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Transliteration

I use a simpler version of the standard Sinhala transliteration, following the approaches taken by anthropologists of Sri Lanka, such as Gombrich and Spencer.

Sinhala vowels a, ā, e, ē, o, approximate respectively to the English vowels in sun, cat, ten, yarn, take, coat.

The macron ā etc., is used to highlight long vowels.

c is pronounced *ch*, as in churn or champion.

t and d are dental consonants, while ṭ and ḍ are retroflex.

th, dh, kh, gh etc., are aspirated consonants.

Double consonants are pronounced twice, such as *dhamma*, or in English ‘bookcase’.

The consonant v falls between English v and w.

Introduction

I don't have the words to describe it...it's like a cup of tea. You get the sweet taste of sugar, you get the creamy taste of milk, and you get the bitter taste of tea. It is a mix of feelings and experiences. It was not just good or bad. It was a mix.

These were the words of Nikhil, an ex-insurgent reflecting on his personal experiences during Sri Lanka's *Bheeshanaya* (the Terror), which submerged much of the southern and central regions in violence, fear, and immense suffering. He was a small, intellectual man with kindly eyes and a reputation for alcohol-fuelled raucous behaviour at the weekends. We were sitting in a dank and remote public house. He insisted that this was the only place in which he felt comfortable enough to talk to me about his life during the Terror. He went on to unfold a convoluted and somewhat contradictory narrative, colourful and positive at points, dark and unsettling at others. It followed the highs of a young man's youthful energy and optimism directed at transforming an unjust socio-political system into a just one, and it followed the lows of being detained by the state and subjected to horrific torture. He remembered his eventual release to entail a reinvigorated thirst for reformulating his life, accompanied by a renewed sense of religiosity, and also recounted the challenges of rebuilding social relationships fractured by violence, while grappling with the memories of his traumatic experiences. Nikhil interrupted his story at points to take a gulp of his beer and a drag of his cigarette. Silence, hesitation, gaps, and at times an apparent difficulty to find the words to articulate his memories of violence, stuttered the flow of our conversation.

How do people who have participated in extensive violence against the state and members of their own community, understand and reflect on their experiences? What meanings and value do they attach to violence and their motivations for it? Moreover, how do those who have engaged in violence reformulate their lives and deal with the social, material, and cultural consequences of their actions in its aftermath? These are among some of the key questions that prompted this study, which is centred on stories belonging to those who lived through a time of terror in southern Sri Lanka. Anchored in a little-known violent period in the late 1980s,

known locally simply as “the Terror” (*Bheeshanaya*), this research is centred on the memories and narrative representations of those who have engaged in political violence. It looks at how violence is negotiated and lived with in the aftermath, and its implications for the self and sociality, from the perspectives of former insurgents who have inflicted it. Rather than being an attempt to construct a ‘history’ of the event, this study is an ethnography of the present that is primarily built on the work of memory.

This research finds that for those who have participated in violence, the mediation of its memory is steeped in the moral, and that it carries important implications for notions of the self and the negotiation of sociality in the present. Memory does not entail an abstract recording of the past, but is ethically tendentious and shaped by the moral and socio-political context of recall. In other words, people who have engaged in violence remember and give meaning to their experiences in ways that allow them to continue living with themselves, with their violent pasts, and with others, in the aftermath.

Life after terror involves efforts to find an ethical framework to deal with past violence (see Mueggler 2001), and entails continuous moral evaluations of a violence that is situated uncomfortably ‘close to home’. The narratives that run through this thesis suggest that while the memory of violence is kept alive in the present as an ethical issue, the allocation of moral responsibility for it remains in a constant state of flux. Life after the *Bheeshanaya* then, for those who have engaged in violence, involves finding ways of living with the past and its un-reconciled ethical implications in the present, as opposed to ‘moving on’ or ‘being healed’ from violence. This research substantiates and builds on compelling arguments put forward by scholars concerning the practice of memory and its moral entailments, along with its implications for constructions of self-identity and relationships with others. These arguments are drawn on as necessary and where relevant throughout this thesis (see Lambek 1996, Antze 1996, Kirmayer 1996).

While this thesis focuses on former insurgents (and to a lesser extent former counter-insurrectionary officers) who participated in the violence of the *Bheeshanaya*, it fundamentally highlights the flawed nature of one-dimensional ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ categories commonly assumed in the study of violence. Through the accounts of those who have participated in violence, this study suggests that these simplistic labels ignore the ambiguities of the lived ‘reality’ of violence on the ground and that they run the risk of pathologising violence and with it entire groups of people, as either ‘perpetrators’ or ‘victims’. As such, this thesis is about people who have participated

in violence who are also themselves both ‘victims’ and ‘witnesses’ of violence, having experienced violence from multiple subject positions.

The 1980s opened a new chapter in the turbulent modern history of Sri Lanka. In addition to the dramatic escalation of the well-documented civil war in the North and the East led by Tamil militants, the state was also grappling with a violent insurrection led by young Sinhala Buddhist people in the South of the country. Sinhala people make up the majority ethnic group in Sri Lanka and are predominantly Buddhists.¹ This bloody insurgency was led by a radical youth movement known as the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/People’s Liberation Front), whose aim was to replace the regime in power with one based on Marxist-nationalist ideology. Its protracted struggle lasted approximately three years, and involved a campaign of violence being launched against the state and members of the Sinhala community. Just as their success seemed imminent, within the space of a few months the insurrection was brutally crushed by state sponsored counter-insurrectionary violence. Estimates of those who died vary from around 40 thousand to 100 thousand, while thousands were ‘disappeared’.² It is this era that is commonly known as the *Bheeshanaya*.

In 2007 I set out to seek those surviving ‘youth’ who had participated in this insurrection by engaging in guerrilla-style warfare against the state. I spent 14 months travelling through several villages and towns in the South of Sri Lanka, speaking to numerous people, mostly former insurgents, about their memories of the *Bheeshanaya*. I had never planned to carry out my fieldwork in the southern region of Sri Lanka. My initial months in the field had been spent amidst the mountains of Kandy in the central region, working on my language skills and hoping to make some contact with former insurgents in the area through the University there. At the same time, I had also decided to keep my options open and to explore other avenues and areas conducive to my research. A weekend break in the South changed everything. I had travelled to meet an old friend Amila. She was keen to hear about this research of mine that was important enough to bring me into a country that everyone else, as she saw it, was trying to get out of.

¹ The violence carried out here took place within the Sinhala community itself (as opposed to being inter-ethnic between Tamil and Sinhala people).

² Definite figures for those who died and were disappeared in the *Bheeshanaya* are not available. However, estimates of those who were killed during this period as quoted in various literature on the topic and by the JVP itself, varies from the conservative figure of 40 thousand to 100 thousand people. The JVP has claimed responsibility for around 6 thousand deaths.

I already knew the centrality of the ‘deep South’ (as it is locally known) to the insurrectionary period. It was commonly regarded as the birthplace of the JVP and its insurgencies. I also knew that many people in this region had suffered through the worst of the *Bheeshanaya*, and that in these picturesque villages and towns there were those who had taken up arms against the state and apparently, against Sinhala Buddhist society itself. My friend was optimistic that she could introduce me to the very people I was having some difficulty tracking down. She did not have much to do by way of persuading me to base much of my fieldwork here. The magical South simply made me not want to leave.

The South was idyllic. At sunset when the skies above the clear turquoise ocean were a mixture of purple, orange, and gold, I would often have to pinch myself to believe that I was really there. The setting was breath-taking, with seemingly endless golden beaches, coconut trees that swayed sleepily in the sea breeze, and thickets of lush jungle to the interior. But, I had heard whispers, and found it difficult to imagine, that there was a time when corpses littered these golden beaches, when sinister and shadowy gangs would stalk their human prey in these jungles, and when the hospitable people who lived in this area, apparently violently ‘turned on each other’, or went into hiding in fear for their lives.

It was a jarring contrast, and one that hounded me throughout my time in the field. The seeming peaceful normality of people’s daily lives seemed oddly juxtaposed to the ‘abnormality’ of the *Bheeshanaya*. I found it difficult to reconcile the narratives of intense suffering and terror with the surrounding visual landscape. People just seemed to go about their lives as normal and the atmosphere seemed tranquil on the surface. If I was reading them correctly, the Terror that had convulsed their social worlds was now long forgotten and relegated to the ‘dustbin’ of history. The *Bheeshanaya* was not mentioned, and nothing in the landscape indicated that the people living in this area had just under 20 years ago, been through southern Sri Lanka’s “most intense period of political violence and terror in modern memory” (Perera 2001: 157).

But the more my cautious conversations about this subject progressed over time, the more I came to realise that people in fact lived with the *Bheeshanaya* in the present and that its memory continued to shape their everyday in powerful ways. I came to find that the South was a place pregnant with the hidden memories of its people; the fearful and ugly memories of a generation, and of a nation. I wanted to dig beneath this veneer of ‘paradise’ and apparent amnesia, and find out why people were

so silent about it. I wanted to know what life was like for those who had lived through the Terror, what it meant to them, and how people had come to terms (if at all) with such colossal violence that had ravaged their lives and communities just two decades ago. I wanted to learn about it from the very people whose lives were inextricably entangled in it. What I unearthed fills the pages of this thesis.

Existing Literature and Scope of Research

The *Bheeshanaya* occupies an awkward position in the modern history of Sri Lanka and in the contemporary lives of its people. It has received little sustained academic attention and is an event that continues to be shrouded in fear, amnesia, and silence. The discomforting nature of violence that took place within members of the same community, often involving neighbours and even friends, has rendered it incomprehensible and a shameful blot on the modern history of Sri Lanka. Many of those who engaged in atrocities during the Terror continue to hold positions of power, and the post-terror context is one in which ‘perpetrators’, ‘victims’, and ‘witnesses’ must live in close proximity to each other, in the absence of justice and reconciliation.

The sparse literature available on the *Bheeshanaya* is, on the one hand, clustered around the course and processes of the insurrection (Alles 1990, Chandraprema 1991, Gunaratna 1990), or on the experiences of ‘victims’ of violence post-terror, on the other hand (Perera 1995, 1998, 1999, 2001; Argenti-Pillen 2003). The latter has been the work of anthropologists who have focussed on trauma, and more specifically on the challenges faced by female survivors of violence. The stories of those who engaged in the violence of this period are noticeably absent. Scholars have called for more empirical work on the *Bheeshanaya* itself, and particularly on the experiences of those who participated in the violence of that period (see De Mel 2001, Hettige 1992, Moore 1993). My research is situated in the post-terror context and builds on the latter category of work. It provides a missing piece of the jigsaw by analysing the accounts of those former insurgents who participated in violence, thereby contributing to a richer picture of the violence of this period.

Through the accounts of former insurgents, which were supplemented by interviews with their own families and the families of those killed or disappeared, there emerges a wider story of the effects of violence and mutual betrayal on kinship and community ties. In a situation of terror where neighbours denounced each other, and exploited the climate of terror to settle personal scores, my research also found

instances where family and community ties transcended the acute binaries created by violence. This study thereby also sheds light on how communities, wracked by violence and mistrust, function in its aftermath.

There has been a recent shift in anthropological scholarship on violence towards considering the transformative impact of violence on subjectivity and the everyday (see Das 2000, 2007; Nordstrom 1995; Green 1999), and some of the most important work has come from research on Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict (see Daniel 1996, Lawrence 2000). However, such studies overwhelmingly focus on the experiences of 'victims' of violence. They have shown violence to be 'world-making', with a capacity to create meaning, distort subjectivity, individualise experiences, and powerfully alter the everyday, which victims strive to re-create. My research makes an important contribution here, through its focus on a 'neglected group', and further builds on the emerging literature on 'perpetrators' of violence (see Mahmood 1996, Browning 2001, Foster et al. 2005, Payne 2008, Hinton 2004a, Ellis 2004).

Scholars have shown memory to involve creative (re)construction, to be shaped by cultural frames and social context, and to entail moral purposes (see Lambek 1996, Kirmayer 1996, Antze 1996). The study of memory in relation to violence has recently highlighted further interesting issues such as the influence of master narratives and individual agency on memory, the role of moral projects and the moral consequences of recall, memory as a site of resistance and hegemonic struggle, and the heterogeneous nature of subaltern memories (see Cole 2003, Spencer 2000, Becker et al. 2000, Amin 1995, Tarlo 2003, Fudjitani et al. 2001, Swedenberg 1995, Mueggler 2001). The few studies available on those who have perpetrated violence have shown amnesia, gaps, disassociation, and altered remembering to be characteristics of their memories of violence (see Browning 2001, Mahmood 2000, Hinton 2004a and 2004b, Payne 2008). These narrative trends are picked up and analysed as they emerge through the stories of former insurgents in this thesis.

Why Study Former Insurgents?

Recent research on Sri Lanka has focused on the well-publicised ethnic conflict in the North and East of the country between the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) and the Sri Lankan state. Intra-group violence in the South of the

country has received little academic attention in comparison. One must be cautious of the dangers of reducing violence to the inevitable outcome of ethnic difference, considering the common occurrence of political violence in our world between those who appear to be the same; as Siegel puts it, the type of violence in which “one kills those in one’s own image” (1998: 1). Scholars have highlighted the study of ‘perpetrators’ in anthropological research on violence overall, as well as that on non-ethnic based political violence in southern Sri Lanka in particular, as clear gaps warranting important attention (see Tambiah 1996, Perera 1999, Uyangoda 2003, Das 1990, Schmidt and Schroder 2001). The dearth of information on both those who participate in violence overall and more specifically on Sri Lanka’s Terror, prompted this study.

My key protagonists are former insurgents, whose voices have been ignored thus far in anthropological literature on this topic. They talk about their lives during the *Bheeshanaya* for the first time here. By former insurgents, I mean those who took part in any kind of insurrectionary activity against the state. During the *Bheeshanaya*, insurgents were loosely construed as being those who engaged in ‘subversive’ activity, which could range from putting up revolutionary posters and organising student agitation, to those who perpetrated outright violence such as murder, assault, and intimidation. My ex-insurgent research participants were drawn from a diverse range of backgrounds. Some had held positions of leadership at local level with several insurgents under their command during the Terror, while others had been guerrilla cadres on the ground. I ensured an appropriate mix of representation from those who no longer supported the JVP (revamped and now in the political mainstream) and those who continued to be active members. Their ages ranged from approximately 35 to 65 years, and their origins lay in peasant, working-class, and middle-class backgrounds. The professions of my ex-insurgent research participants were varied and included farmers, fishermen, labourers, shopkeepers, taxi-drivers, teachers, and lawyers. Many of them hailed from the South of Sri Lanka, but I also interviewed former insurgents from Colombo, Kandy, the West coast and the central ‘dry-zone’. All my ex-insurgent research participants were men who had engaged in insurrectionary activity in the second insurrection, while some had been active in both JVP insurgencies.³

³ This research focuses on the second insurrection launched by the JVP and the state counter-insurrection that followed, from 1987 to around 1991. The JVP also launched an insurgency in 1971 that was crushed almost immediately by the state. Both these insurgencies are discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

For balance, and to maximise representation, their accounts are set against the perspectives of members of the state security forces who engaged in counter-insurrectionary violence, and the stories of those who did not directly engage in violence but whose lives were touched by it, such as family members of those killed or disappeared by one faction or the other, and others who ‘witnessed’ the Terror. While this research is centred primarily on the stories of former insurgents, I believe that locating the accounts of people with different and possibly opposing perspectives and interests within what remains contested space, allows for richer analysis of the narratives of those who engaged in political violence.

It is interesting to note that former insurgents who participated in this research appear to share certain personal characteristics and attributes, as we shall see in the course of this thesis. For instance, I was struck by the sophisticated and highly articulate manner in which they expressed themselves; their apparent political, ethical and social awareness; and their subscription to a more rational form of Buddhism. Through their narratives, former insurgents represented themselves as educated, socially conscious ‘thinkers’, as differentiated from the popular negative stereotype of the *rālla* (the herd) - those ‘undesirable’ and unethical insurgents possessed of the herd mentality. The issues this raises are discussed in more detail in Chapter 1.

In the recent growth in ethnographies on political violence the perspectives of those who have participated in violence have tended to be overlooked in preference for the survival stories of ‘victims’. Stories of ‘victims’ are important, but only provide “part of the full story” (Foster et al. 2005: 91). The study of those who have inflicted violence indeed pose particular methodological challenges as have been acknowledged by scholars, particularly in terms of access and ethics (see Foster et al. 2005, Payne 2008, Mahmood 1996). Nevertheless, if we are to gain an in-depth and holistic understanding of how violence is negotiated with, and its implications, we must carefully listen to the equally important voices of those who engage in violence.

‘Perpetrators’ versus ‘Victims’

Common approaches to the study of violence tend to refer in dichotomous terms to “perpetrators” and “victims”. These binary constructions differentiate between ‘perpetrators’ as active subjects, and ‘victims’ (or survivors) as passive objects (Foster et al. 2005: 3). Such simplistic labels offer a limited perspective on those involved in violence as this research finds, which could result in a naive interpretation of the world in terms of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ or ‘black’ and ‘white’. The

use of these one-dimensional labels also risks pathologising violence and homogenising diverse individuals as undifferentiated groups of ‘perpetrators’ or ‘victims’. Foster et al. have shown that the use of the ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ binaries in the context of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission resulted in a view that skirted around the “complexities and ambiguities, rich in the lived experience under apartheid, of collaboration and complicity with apartheid, of the murky terrain of spies, crossovers and informers” (2005: 3). In doing so, they add their voices to the increasing number of scholars who have highlighted the deficiencies of such mutually exclusive classifications by pointing to the reality of their constructed nature and fluid boundaries (see Levi 1988 and 2004, West 2000, Borneman 1997).

My research is centred on former insurgents who have engaged in insurrectionary violence, and who thereby may ostensibly be regarded as ‘perpetrators’ by some. However, I use this term (in inverted commas) with caution. The former insurgents featured in this thesis also experienced violence as victims, and the most blatant evidence of this can be found in their narratives of being subjected to torture (Chapter 3). They also told stories of being witness to violence exacted by others. Moreover, having come through the experience of terror, they could also be considered ‘survivors’ of violence. This research shows the lived reality of terror to be convoluted and to be experienced from different, and often overlapping, subject positions. Violence during the *Bheeshanaya* operated at multiple levels, with various avenues for direct and indirect involvement in it opening up, potentially leaving many people with various amounts of ‘blood on their hands’. This renders the application of absolute ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ categories unworkable on the ground. The former insurgents who participated in this research were by no means one-dimensional characters. Their narratives epitomised the contradictions, diversity, and ambiguities that characterise human life and behaviour. Moreover, former insurgents categorically refused to accept the label of ‘perpetrator’; mainly due to the negative moral weight it carried. Rather than being straightforward labels, ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victims’ are in themselves ethical subject categories that carry significant moral meaning and shape people’s notions of the self and their relationships with others. I am in agreement with Foster et al. who state that, “the problem of the ‘truth’ in the labelling of a ‘perpetrator’ remains just that: a problem” (Foster et al. 2005: 6).

A Note on ‘Ethics’ and ‘Morals’

In this thesis I use the words ethics and morality interchangeably. In recent years, scholars have highlighted the need to find a theoretical basis to the anthropological study of ethics and morality, emphasising that such theoretical reflection would enrich the discipline and fill the gap created by the lack of sustained debate on this issue (see Laidlaw 2002, Zigon 2009, Lambek 2000). Laidlaw (2002) for instance, delineates individual discussions on morality by anthropologists and philosophers through the years, from Durkheim and Kant, to Foucault and Nietzsche, in his attempts to develop a way of studying ethics comparatively and ethnographically. He argues that an ethnographic and theoretical interest in the notion of freedom is a fundamental requirement for an anthropology of ethics.

While many anthropologists have tended to move between the use of ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ without drawing specific differentiations between these two terms, others have made attempts to individually define, and distinguish between, ‘ethics’ and ‘morals’ (see Williams in Laidlaw 2002, Robbins 2007, Zigon 2009). For Williams, morality is distinguished from ethics by way of its formal characteristics, whereby judgement is in terms of specific moral obligations (cited in Laidlaw 2002: 316). Zigon (2009) argues that distinctions between morality and ethics must provide the basis for an anthropology on morality. He differentiates between “non-consciously enacted morality” and “the conscious awareness of ethical dilemmas” (2009: 251). Building on the work of Robbins (2007), he contends that morality is enacted non-consciously and that it is un-reflective, while ethics on the other hand, is a conscious and reflexive process, which arises from what he calls “moral breakdowns”. According to him, ethics then is a creative process that involves questioning one’s own moral dispositions and entailing work on the self (Zigon 2009).

The eminent ethicist and moral philosopher Peter Singer uses the terms ‘ethics’ and ‘morals’ interchangeably in his book entitled *Practical Ethics*, while acknowledging that there is a general assumption that morality is a system of prohibitions and as such is considered out-dated by some (1993: 1). In a similar vein, distinguished scholars on Buddhist ethics move between the use of ‘morals’ and ‘ethics’ without drawing distinctions between these terms, in their debates on religious ethics (see Hallisey N.d, Bartholomeusz 2002). My use of ‘morality’ and ‘ethics’ follows the approach taken by the latter group of scholars. Drawing distinctions between, and engaging in debates on the nature of, ‘ethics’ and ‘morals’

is not meaningful for the purpose of this particular research, and as such I use these terms interchangeably in this thesis.

The *Bheeshanaya* in Context

Terminology

My use of the term *Bheeshanaya* and its temporal parameters reflect people's own interpretations of the Terror as found during my fieldwork. For many people, the fear and terror that marred their lives started with the beginning of the insurrection and the frightening violence unleashed by the JVP. This was coupled with the sporadic responses it evoked from some sections of the police and state security forces, finally culminating in the heightened state of terror unleashed by the UNP (United National Party) regime. My desire from the outset has been for this research to be led by the people whose lives and stories it is built around. For this reason I use the term *Bheeshanaya* in this thesis to encompass the entire period of violence, beginning with the JVP insurrection in 1987, and ending with the tail end of the counter-insurrection around 1991. I recognise that 1989 witnessed a heightened period of state terror, and this is acknowledged in the stories that run through this thesis.

Background of the JVP movement

A comprehensive historical account of the *Bheeshanaya* is not practically feasible here. However, a brief review of the background of the JVP, its insurrections, and the state repression, is necessary. The JVP emerged in the mid-1960s, formed by a small group of dissident members of the Peking wing of the Sri Lanka Communist Party, with an agenda to establish a socialist state. It began life as an underground movement and most notable among its small leadership was the charismatic Rohana Wijeweera, who was renowned for his oratory skills and being well-versed in Marxist-Leninist and Maoist ideology.

In the late 1960s Wijeweera and his colleagues travelled the country studying the problems of rural Sinhala people in a bid to “win (people) over to Marxism” (Alles 1990: 14). The JVP delivered ‘five secret lectures’ across the Sinhala majority parts of the country as part of its recruitment and mobilisation campaign. These covered the ‘economic crisis’, which the JVP claimed could only be remedied by the establishment of a proletariat dictatorship, which would abolish private property and implement economic collectivisation; the problems of neo-colonialism; the threat of India’s expansionist agenda; a criticism of the established Left parties for their inability to appeal to and mobilise the working class; and the final lecture, which set out the path that the revolution should take, advocated that the revolution “should not follow a uniform path, but vary according to the time, place, and condition” (Alles 1990: 44). The movement gained a significant following among educated, unemployed, Sinhala Buddhist young people of rural origin. What is striking about the JVP’s embryonic phase was its radical Marxist-Leninist stance, and its plans to execute a revolution to overthrow the existing state and replace it with socialist dictatorship from the outset.

The First JVP Insurrection of 1971

The insurrection of the late 1980s, which forms the basis of this research, was not the JVP’s first attempt at revolution. In 1971 the JVP launched an insurrection, which has been described as the first of its nature in modern Sri Lankan history (Uyangoda 2003: 38). This insurrection was relatively short lived – spanning a few weeks, and has been portrayed by some as lacking adequate planning and preparation (see Gunaratna 1990). It took the form of concerted attacks on police stations across the country, which brought several districts under JVP control. Communication problems between JVP leaders had led to a premature attack on the Moneragala police station. This resulted in an alert to all police stations and the imposition of an island-wide curfew. The intensified security led to the failure of further attacks on police stations, and thwarted accompanying missions to abduct the Prime Minister; to attack a prominent army camp; to capture Colombo; and to release Wijeweera who was in prison at the time (see Gunaratna 1990).

The UF (United Front) regime treated the insurrection as a national security threat, and the young people who participated in the insurgency were referred to by

the state naively as ‘misguided youth’.⁴ The state responded to the insurrection with intense brutality with the sole aim of crushing the insurgency:

After April 5, a single day did not pass without a hundred youth being killed. Some were hung, or beaten to death and displayed, while others were lined up and shot. For days mothers searched for their missing sons. Many of them were shot for pasting posters or following lectures. Most of the villagers had followed the lectures through mere curiosity. After all, the contents of the lectures were about problems, which were very relevant to them. Some were purposely disfigured or made permanently disabled and at times parents themselves were detained and often beaten until their children surrendered. (Gunaratna 1990: 106)

The state terror employed to suppress the insurrection led to the deaths of around 20 thousand young people, and a similar number being imprisoned, including Wijeweera (see Uyangoda 2003 and JVP international website). The UF Government was forced to recognise the ‘social volcano’ that fuelled the insurrection, and proceeded to implement a programme of land reform.

The Second JVP Insurrection of 1987-1989

The insurrection of the 1980s differed in many respects from that of 1971. The first one had a clear radical left-wing ideology with the rhetoric of ‘class-struggle’, while the second insurrection took on more of a ‘patriotic’ nationalist identity. The life of the first insurrection was snuffed out within a matter of weeks by the UF regime. The second insurrection was significantly more violent in character, and took the form of a protracted struggle lasting around two and a half years, which entailed “a vast campaign of assassination, strikes and public intimidation” (Venugopal 2009: 30). The second phase of the JVP also saw a high level of militarisation, and the creation of its military wing – the dreaded DJV (Deshapremi Janatha Vyaparanaya/Patriotic People’s Organisation). This allowed the JVP leadership to distance itself from, and deny responsibility for, much of the grisly violence that it carried out.

The remarkable ability of the JVP to reinvent itself and re-emerge following considerable defeat is a feature that is particularly notable. Following its huge defeat in 1971, the movement was re-launched, in the main keeping with its socialist

⁴ The UF (United Front) was a coalition comprised of left-leaning parties led by the SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party).

principles. This was partly facilitated by the release of many of its leadership, including Wijeweera, with the advent of the new UNP Government in 1977 led by J.R. Jayawardene. Many of its supporters from the first phase had been killed and others had left the movement and entered 'mainstream' society. A handful of insurgents remained faithful to the JVP and went on to participate in the second insurrection. Many who did re-join the JVP left shortly after, following divisions on whether to take the revolutionary or democratic path and disagreements about the 'ethnic issue'.

Wijeweera now emerged as its sole leader. The JVP proceeded to actively regain support, particularly among educated, unemployed young Sinhala Buddhist people. While the majority of its supporters were from marginalised and rural backgrounds, and predominantly from the lower castes, Moore (1993) points out that in its second phase, the JVP was also able to draw on the lower echelons of the urban populace (e.g., clerical and office workers). A significant and active segment of the second JVP mobilisation was young Buddhist monks. Shared social origins and grievances, including particular problems relating to the *sangha* (Buddhist monastic order) attracted them to the JVP. The JVP once again spoke to the grievances of marginalised young people, and offered them a viable alternative in a political system that was dominated by the two nepotistic parties comprising the UNP and the SLFP, which were led by urban elite, high caste families. By the early 1980s, the JVP had emerged as the strongest Left party in Sri Lanka.

Three significant events that took place in the 1980s set the stage for the July insurrection. The first was the cancelling of general elections by the UNP regime in 1982. Instead, a referendum was held to extend the life of Parliament for a further six years. This took place amidst mass protests and allegations of intimidation and referendum rigging. With the extension of Jayawardene's executive powers to that of President, and with the regime itself blighted by allegations of corruption and violence, the referendum caused much anger and frustration, particularly among young people who were denied their democratic right to effect a regime change.

The second incident involved the 1983 anti-Tamil riots. In response to reports of 13 Sinhala soldiers being killed by Tamil guerrillas in the North, a spate of violent riots led by 'angry Sinhala mobs' spread from Colombo to the East of the country. This resulted in the slaughter of Tamil civilians and the destruction of Tamil owned property. Despite prominent members of the UNP being implicated in the riots, the Government decided to scapegoat the parties of the Left, and proscribed all Left

parties including the JVP. Shortly afterwards, the ban on all parties was lifted except that of the JVP, despite its numerous appeals. It is likely that the UNP viewed the growing popularity of the JVP as a threat to its own position. Its proscription and exclusion from the democratic mainstream drove the JVP underground, where it began planning its second revolution to capture state power.

The 1983 riots led to a massive increase in recruitment to the Tamil separatist movement in the North and the East, and a dramatic escalation in the conflict. With security forces battling Tamil militants in the North, the LTTE launched attacks on the South. Its murder of Sinhala civilians and Buddhist monks in particular caused fear and outrage among many Sinhala people who became increasingly discontented with the UNP regime for failing to bring an end to the war and protect the Sinhalese people. Protests led by JVP trade unions and student organisations in the South were suppressed with heavy-handed security measures and attacks by UNP-sponsored 'thugs'.

The destabilisation of its neighbour due to the escalating civil war and the influx of Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka provoked the Indian Government to intervene. This was the third significant event that set the stage for the July insurrection. In 1987, under heavy pressure from India, the UNP was coerced into signing the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord (ILPA). One of its requirements was that Sri Lankan troops be replaced by the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in the North and East. The perception of the ILPA being imposed from outside in flagrant violation of Sri Lanka's sovereignty and anxiety about the presence of Indian troops, led to an eruption of protests and rioting by Sinhala people in Colombo. These indicated some JVP involvement. Riding the wave of nationalist sentiment, the JVP launched its second insurrection in July 1987, taking many by surprise. As Uyangoda notes:

The JVP's self-understanding during this period was that it was the sole patriotic force with the historical mission ... to liberate the "motherland" from 'traitors', 'aggressors', and 'foreign invaders'. (Uyangoda 2003: 43)

The 1980s brought some of the bloodiest and most turbulent years that Sri Lanka has faced in recent history. The Government was embroiled in two violent conflicts - the separatist conflict with Tamil militants mobilised by the LTTE in the North and East, and the conflict in the South and parts of the central region led by Sinhala youth spearheaded by the JVP.

The targets of JVP violence were wide-ranging – from members of the UNP, numerous other political opponents (including Left parties), civil servants, and security personnel, to academics, media representatives, trade union leaders, and civilians who defied orders issued by the ‘patriots’. The JVP further systematically enforced unofficial strikes and curfews (*hartāl*) that demanded, on pain of death, the lengthy closure of private and public institutions, enforced a boycott of all Indian products, and attacked public infrastructure. This strategy almost crippled the economy, and the state apparatus was brought to the brink of collapse with a wave of political resignations resulting from the JVP’s murder of prominent MPs and threats being issued to others who failed to vacate their posts. The atmosphere of disorder was heightened by the lengthy closure of schools and universities (rich recruiting ground for the JVP) and the face of the media being taken over by army personnel following the murder of prominent TV personalities. While the JVP had no control over the Tamil dominated areas of the North and some parts of the East, the rest of the country was gripped in violence, fear, and confusion. Moreover, the JVP seemed to be gaining the upper hand in its battle with the Government, with it commonly being referred to as *punci ānḍuva* (the small government). It maintained some support at village level by carrying out basic community services (e.g., mending roads, helping flood victims), and its strongest support base was in the low caste and economically marginalised areas.

An interesting aspect of the JVP’s use of violence has been its seemingly moral basis. Dividing the world as they saw it according to moral codes - ‘good’ (‘patriots’) and ‘evil’ (‘traitors’); the meting out of punishments to ‘traitors’; purifying local communities of ‘anti-social elements’ (e.g., punishment of errant husbands, prostitutes, criminals); detailed public justifications as to why certain people deserved to be killed; and the murder of Buddhist monks for being materialistic and immoral (i.e., not living by Buddhist teachings), point to an underlying sense of moral justice that underpinned the JVP’s thinking on violence (at least at the initial stages).

Moore (1993) states that while in its second phase, the JVP was never widely and positively popular due to the violence of its methods, which alienated most people, it did draw admiration beyond the ranks of its own supporters for its reputation as the agency establishing moral order. He points to the rumours and stories circulating in the late 1980s of JVP work at community level and the general assumption that if someone had been killed by the JVP they somehow deserved it (1993: 628). It is true that the JVP did maintain some support for its ‘clean-up’ of

villages. People often told me that the JVP initially “did some good things” and substantiated this claim with examples such as village thugs being punished. However, many also claimed that the violence soon went beyond what was deemed to be acceptable and became more and more indiscriminate. Two senior counter-insurrectionary officers told me that it was this that led to the JVP’s eventual downfall. The excessive violence directed at those who were seen not to deserve it led to the public turning against the JVP and denouncing them to the security forces. One senior counter-insurrectionary officer told me: “It was the *anē pav*⁵ that brought about their downfall. People started feeling sorry for those who were being killed by the JVP. And suddenly we found all this information coming to us about them from ordinary people”.

Despite the ongoing crisis that the Government was faced with, it called Presidential and General elections in 1988 and 1989 respectively. The JVP ‘banned’ these elections and commanded that they be boycotted, doing their utmost to disrupt them, including murdering election officials, candidates, and voters.⁶ This move may have been generated through fear of a new government with the legitimacy of the electorate undermining their own position as ‘emancipators’ of the people, in their project to overthrow a corrupt and unpopular regime. The result of the election was the re-election of the UNP with President Premadasa replacing Jayawardene. The JVP would inevitably have been discomfited by the election of Premadasa, as he posed a threat to their monopoly of anti-Indian nationalist sentiment and to their image as the patriotic emancipators of the oppressed. Premadasa was of marginalised socio-economic background and spoke to the poor. He was also anti-ILPA, calling for the withdrawal of Indian troops. In February 1989, he invited the LTTE and the JVP for negotiations. While the LTTE accepted, the JVP failed to respond, despite repeated calls and the observance of a week-long ceasefire by the security forces. On the face of it, the JVP seemed to be on the brink of success in its battle for state power, and this was probably one of the reasons for its refusal to engage in negotiations.

Believing that success was close at hand, in August 1989 the JVP delivered its final blow, which was also to be its biggest mistake. It issued an ultimatum to all security personnel to desert their posts, warning that failure to do so would mean that “the patriotic armed troops will adopt merciless measures against them and their

⁵ *Anē pav* is generally an expression of sympathy, empathy, or shock. *Pav* is derived from the Buddhist karmic framework and denotes an immoral action that entails negative karmic consequences for the agent. *Anē pav* here is used to express moral denigration of the actions of the JVP and sympathy for the victims of those actions.

⁶ The success of the JVP’s terror campaign was evident in this election, which was marked by a significant low voter-turnout, with some areas recording turnouts of around 20% - 30%.

families” (Chandraprema 1991: 12). It was probable that the lack of enthusiasm expressed by the security forces thus far in curtailing the insurrection led to their mood being misread by the JVP. The security forces responded with their own poster campaign addressed to the JVP that stated, “give up or *your* families will be killed” (Moore 1993: 638). The JVP is then said to have begun ruthlessly carrying out its threat. This gave the security forces the impetus it had lacked so far to crack down on the insurgents. There ensued a bloody battle between the security forces and the JVP that led to what has been described as “one of the most horrifying counter-insurgency operations in South Asia” (Uyangoda 2003: 45).

Much like the insurrection, efforts have been made to erase the counter-insurrection from public memory. Some basic information on events of this period can be gleaned from studies mainly carried out on post-terror society through the narratives of survivors (see Perera 1995, 1999, 2001, 2008; De Silva 2005; Argenti-Pillen 2003; Spencer 2000). The state terror unleashed during this period was largely indiscriminate and consumed more lives than the JVP campaign of violence. Paramilitary groups, vigilantes, and various death squads stalked the country and tens of thousands of young people suspected of insurgent activity or of having sympathy for the JVP (many who were innocent) were abducted, tortured, and killed or disappeared. The use of the *gōni billa* – the masked informant, who publicly denounced members of his or her community to the counter-insurrectionary forces, put intense pressure on community relationships. The climate of terror further witnessed the playing out of personal squabbles as people exacted revenge on enemies and denounced their neighbours, adding to the overall climate of fear and confusion.

It is significant to note that a movement that had seemed indestructible – one that the security forces had grappled with for two years, was wiped out within the space of a few months following the threat directed at the security forces’ own families. Many security personnel, particularly at the lower ranks, were reluctant to attack the JVP due to reasons of shared social background and empathy with the grievances highlighted by the JVP. By the end of 1989 almost the entire leadership of the JVP, including the omnipotent Wijeweera, had been captured and killed by counter-insurrectionary forces.⁷

⁷ There are many cross-cultural similarities between the counter-insurrectionary measures adopted in Sri Lanka and many parts of the world. The use of death-squads and masked informants, such as the U.S.-inspired *goni billa* are cases in point. In 1983 given the backdrop of the Cold War, the UNP regime was able to use the anti-socialist stance emanating from Reagan’s U.S. to proscribe the JVP, and this ideological stance was also manipulated in the counter-insurrection. A few people I spoke to also talked of the US and Israel ‘helping’ the state in its counter-insurrection. However, these accounts are impossible to substantiate due to a lack of evidence and empirical challenges.

The JVP in Electoral Politics

Once again we see the remarkable ability of the JVP to pick itself up and dust itself off after enormous defeat. Following its near decimation, a re-invented JVP re-appeared in the mainstream political arena in the mid-1990s. Somawansa Amarasingha, the only survivor of the original Politburo, who had fled into exile overseas, emerged as its new leader. Despite its initial years as a reinvented electoral party being marked by internal rivalries and fending off accusations of secretly plotting violent revolts, the JVP proceeded to successfully establish itself as a mainstream political force, winning 39 Parliamentary seats in 2004 (see Venugopal 2009, Uyangoda 2008). Following its re-invention as an electoral party, the JVP political agenda contained a mix of Marxism and Sinhala nationalism. Venugopal contends that this “flexible allegiance to two different ideologies allowed the JVP to tactically bend from one to the other, in line with political circumstance, and to recruit and mobilise as an authentic representative of both doctrines” (2009: 18).

Its political opposition to the Norwegian-sponsored peace process between the UNP-led UNF (United National Front) Government and the LTTE, contributed to the UNF’s electoral defeat in 2004 and the collapse of the peace-process, along with the failure of subsequent attempts to resurrect it (Venugopal 2009: 2-3). The JVP became a key coalition partner in the new UPFA (United People’s Freedom Alliance) Government in 2004, only to dramatically resign from Government the following year over disagreements on a proposed joint mechanism to co-ordinate Tsunami relief efforts between the LTTE and the Government. Since 2006 it consistently called for a military ‘solution’ to the conflict in the North.

Venugopal (2008) points out that the JVP does not espouse ethnic exclusivism, nor has it aroused anti-Tamil sentiment. Its position on the ethnic conflict has instead been fuelled by Marxist ideas of equality, liberation, and justice, and its hostility targeted at Tamil nationalist ideology as opposed to the Tamil people. (2009: 18-19). This position was substantiated by my own findings in the field. Nearly all the JVP supporters I spoke to during my fieldwork emphasised that Tamil people had valid grievances that needed to be addressed and pointed to the discrimination Tamil people had suffered as a result of their minority status. At the same time they expressed their animosity towards the LTTE by accusing it of ethnic chauvinism, terrorism, and of oppressing the Tamil people. The reasons I was

commonly given for their opposition to a separate state for Tamils is typified in the following extract of a conversation I had with a former JVP insurgent, who continued to support the JVP. He told me:

The Tamils are our brothers and sisters. So we must all learn to live together as equals in society. That can't happen if we start dividing the country and separating the Sinhalese and the Tamils. It's like a marriage. If my wife and I argue tonight, I can't then tell her to leave and go and live in another house.

Venugopal further argues that the mass appeal of Sinhala nationalism lies in the fact that it is fundamentally rooted in class dynamics. Sinhala nationalism connects the masses to the state, which is the largest material benefactor in society and provides the only realistic path out of poverty. The JVP's Sinhala nationalism, rather than necessarily being a deviation from mobilisation on a class basis, "is in many ways a reversion to class mobilisation through more successful means" (Venugopal 2009: 36).

Two thousand and eight saw the surprise split of the JVP, amidst claims of interpersonal rivalries, disagreements over support for President Mahinda Rajapakse, and the mainstream JVP's discomfort with the breakaway group's Sinhala nationalist stance (see Uyangoda 2008, Venugopal 2008). One group led by Wimal Weerawansa (the JVP's charismatic Propaganda Secretary) went on to form the National Freedom Front (NFF) allied to President Rajapakse's administration.⁸

Data Collection, Location, and People

The fieldwork for this research took place over a period of 14 months, and across 16 villages and towns in the South of Sri Lanka, 5 villages in Kandy, and 4 in central and suburban Colombo, as well as 3 in the central 'dry zone'. Interviews were carried out with 32 former insurgents, 12 former members of the security forces, and with others whose lives were touched by the Terror, such as urban elites, people who had lost loved ones to violence, and those who had observed the violence of this period. Interviews with urban elites took place exclusively in central Kandy and

⁸ For reasons behind the JVP split, see Venugopal, R. (2008) and Uyangoda, J. (2008).

Colombo. Primary interview data followed on from an extended period of ethnographic fieldwork, which entailed informal conversations, ‘hanging-out’ with people, attending public functions (e.g. JVP rallies, the annual ‘heroes day’ event to commemorate JVP insurgents killed by counter-insurrectionary forces), and local literature research (e.g. drawing on local newspapers dating back to the *Bheeshanaya* and relevant locally-published articles and books from local libraries). The sensitivity of the subject, and the fear, silence, and suspicion that marked the post-terror research context had a significant impact on my method of data collection. All research participants categorically refused to have their interviews recorded, due to fear of identification or reprisals. I recorded all interviews by hand in a small note-book I carried with me to interviews, in an unobtrusive a manner as was possible. My aim was to put research participants at ease, while respecting their right to privacy. Careful efforts were made to protect the privacy of research participants, and these are detailed in my discussion of ethical considerations later in this chapter.

Fieldwork for this research was multi-sited, spanning several areas across the southern and central regions of Sri Lanka. However, many of the people whose stories fill the pages of this thesis lived in villages and towns scattered around the South of Sri Lanka, locally known by its ancient name of ‘Ruhuna’.⁹ Ruhuna is considered the heartland of the JVP and continues to form its core strength. The majority of the JVP leadership in the 1980s, including its charismatic founder Rohana Wijeweera, hailed from this region.

The high levels of support for the radical politics of the JVP and seeming readiness of southern people to engage in armed uprisings against the state are commonly put down to social disadvantage and political-economic alienation. The South, like many other rural and peripheral areas, has not had its fair share of the spoils of development that Colombo and some of its surrounds have enjoyed, as a result of the Colombo-centric policies of consecutive governments. In addition, the majority of Ruhuna people fall into the category of those Sinhala rural youth “ghettoised...within the frames of vernacular education” (Rampton and Welikala 2005: 29-30) due to the *swabhāsha* (“Sinhala Only”) educational policy instituted by the SLFP Government in 1956. The concurrent continuation of the importance attached to English for access to social mobility and employment has resulted in the

⁹ While this research was carried out across several regions in Sri Lanka, I focus on the South here as many of the research participants originated from this area.

exclusion of *swabhāsha* educated youth, creating deep social and economic cleavages between them and their wealthy English-educated urban counter-parts.

A poverty brief prepared for Oxfam by the Centre for Poverty Analysis in 2004 states that “chronic unemployment, low levels of income, and high incidence of poverty, especially in the interior areas, characterise the region” (CEPA 2004: 2). High unemployment rates among educated youth are particularly emphasised. However, CEPA also points to diversity in human development between localities in the region. It puts the persistence of poverty in the region down to “natural climatic shocks” and a failure of the existing policy framework to address regional development. The JVP has always espoused the politics of the poor and the marginalised. Educated unemployment and economic hardship have been two of its key campaign cries.

Ruhuna is also significant because of its much vaunted distinct regional identity. The people that I worked among were eager to induct the ignorant outsider into her new environment. Ruhuna people, they often told me, were *napuru* (fierce, thuggish), *valiyaṭa barai* (up for scraps), *eḍitarai* (courageous), *keling*¹⁰ (direct), and *bhaya nāti gatiya* (fearless). Many people drew on such terms to rationalise the prevalence of insurrectionary activity in the South. An analysis of such terms and southern identity itself is lacking in anthropological literature. However, some writers have drawn attention to the loaded statement “*api dakunē minissu*” (we are southern people) as carrying threatening overtones (see Chandraprema 1989), and there has been some research on fearlessness as a local idiom of masculinity (see Jeganathan 2000).

A Very Real Problem for the Southern Sinhalese

In Sinhala dominated rural areas of Sri Lanka, the military has evolved into the largest employer of youth (see Venugopal 2008 and 2009). The South sends a disproportionately large number of its youth to the Sri Lankan armed forces – mainly as foot soldiers. This is generally put down to feelings of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and to some bizarre form of re-enacting the historic role that the people of Ruhuna played in providing foot-soldiers for the armies of ancient Sinhala Kings, by some non-southern Sinhalese and urban elites. There is also a common local belief,

¹⁰ Keling can be translated as straight-talking, fair, and ‘what you see is what you get’.

particularly among high caste non-southerners, that for many southern young people, joining the army is simply a natural act that follows their ancient historic roots which lie in the Indian warrior caste (*Kshātriya*). The military has been the only sector of the Sri Lankan state to have consistently expanded since the 1980s. Venugopal argues that the war and connected military growth has served to preserve much of the social mobility and poverty reduction functions that the state previously performed. It accounts for almost half of all cash-paying jobs in some areas, and provides employment in the deteriorating small-holder rural economy (2009: 35)

Almost all of my research participants in Ruhuna had a family member or close relative in the armed forces. When I initially asked them about this, many drew on the so-called cultural traits of the people of Ruhuna to explain the large number of soldiers recruited from their region. A typical example is one where my friend Ramya one day explained the decision of her brother, and many of her village peers, to sign up using terms such as, “us southerners are not afraid” (*bhaya nā*) and “us southern people fearlessly put ourselves forward for anything” (*dakunē minissu bhaya nātuva ōna dēkaṭa idiripat venavā*). However, as the months drew on and the closer a relationship I developed with her family, her mother confided, “there is nothing else for our boys to do around here. He (her son who was in the army) can’t speak English well. Without that you can’t do anything”. My friend, who had previously espoused southern courage and fearlessness as reasons for young southerners signing up to the security forces, later admitted that her family was now thankfully financially stable because of the steady income her brother was bringing in. Ramya went on to explain that the family now had a bit more respect from people, and that they were able to access public services (that they were rightfully due) more easily without the harassment for bribes and time-wasting (*rastiādu*) that ordinary people had to endure in public institutions.

In the reality of everyday life, I found poverty and a lack of alternative employment opportunities, rather than grand ideologies of Buddhist nationalism or historic calling, to be the main factors driving southern youth to sign up to the security forces. Interestingly and unsurprisingly, I also found more of an awareness of the harsh realities of war – what it meant to be on the battlefield and the suffering that conflict brought to people on both sides, among these families in the South. While many of my friends in Ruhuna disagreed with the concept of a separate state for the Tamil minority, the majority of people I engaged with acknowledged that a political solution, rather than a military one, was necessary for the war to end. I came across

far more militant Sinhala Buddhist nationalist ideology among the powerful elites in Colombo and Kandy, than I did among the people of the so-called heartland of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.¹¹

Social status (*tatvaya*) is of paramount importance to many Sinhala families, and was no less significant to people in the South. The status (*tatvaya*) that one occupies in society is dependent on indicators such as ownership of land, formal education, conspicuous consumption, and family background (now decreasing in importance in a context where class and material success is fast over-taking caste and 'pedigree' in importance). One's status also dictates the respect one receives and their access to goods and services, in a country where debilitating corruption makes accessing the most basic public services an arduous challenge. My friend Ramya and her family were not of high status. However, having a family member in the armed forces raised the status of the family within their community and made everyday life somewhat easier. At the time of conducting fieldwork for this research, joining the army was a frightening prospect in the face of an unforgiving civil war where one was very likely to be killed or left severely disabled. Ramya's brother was more or less forced to join the army through sheer economic need. However, admitting this (and expressing fear of joining the army) would have run the risk of diminishing his status. Drawing on respected local cultural characteristics to convey one's 'choice' to sign-up, was a measure used to prevent a deterioration of status.

Living Context of Research Participants

Everyday life for the majority of my research participants was a constant struggle. The impact of international markets, global trade injustice, foreign debt, the hefty expense of funding the civil war and its impact on sectors such as tourism and foreign investment, and economic mismanagement and corruption by consecutive governments, had led to a severely deteriorating economy. The rapid escalation of inflation (set at around 22% during my fieldwork) had set in motion a sharp increase

¹¹ In May 2009, at the time of writing up this research, the Sri Lankan Government declared that the civil war had been brought to an end with the defeat of the LTTE and the death of its leader Prabhakaran. The implications of this in terms of employment opportunities in the armed forces for people of the South are difficult to predict at this stage. However, the Sri Lankan Government has announced plans to increase the security forces by 50% which it states is necessary to prevent further militancy and to assist in post-war development work (source: BBC World News 29 June 2009).

in the cost of basic necessities.¹² The growing intensity of the civil war brought on an additional psychological and emotional burden for many of those who had family members in the security forces. There was also an acute awareness of the gap between the rich (mainly based in Colombo) and the poor, and a constant sense of being subjected to injustice. The extract of a conversation that I had with one former insurgent in many ways typified conversations I had with many people during my time in the field, which frequently featured the daily economic struggles one was forced to endure:

If I had died in those days (the *Bheeshanaya*) I would not live this life of suffering (*duka*). I have so many economic problems. I work long hours and have a family of 5 to support, and 2 of them are children that I need to feed and educate, on a salary of Rs 10 thousand a month [approximately £45].¹³ We can't even afford to live in a place of our own. We live at the parental house...I dress well, wear a nice shirt and smile, but only I know the problems that fill my mind... My wife tells me to buy milk packets for the kids. But one pack is Rs 200. I can't afford that...I try to borrow (money) from people, but I can't keep borrowing and afford to pay them back. As a father it breaks my heart¹⁴ (*hita ridenava*) when I can't buy milk for my children. Do you know what that feels like? To not be able to give milk to your children? In Colombo there are people who spend Rs 200 thousand [approximately £900] a month on their families. For many children in Colombo, from birth they live a life of luxury. My heart is on fire (*hita gini gannava*). My little children don't live a comfortable (*sāpa*) life. I see the life they live. It is not one of comfort.

The villages and towns in which I did fieldwork were not bounded or static. At the time of my fieldwork many people were leaving in search of employment opportunities usually in the armed forces and the Middle-East (e.g., working as housemaids and construction labourers in Saudi Arabia, kitchen hands on US army bases in Iraq and Afghanistan). There were no illusions about the harsh working conditions in these countries. However, people generally felt their options to be limited. Even in their attempts to seek opportunities abroad, they were subjected to the debilitating bureaucracy and corruption of the state.

¹² The public owned and politically influenced Central Bank of Sri Lanka sets the official rate of inflation. The reliability of its information is questionable as it is commonly perceived to publish significantly watered-down rates of inflation in order to allay public criticism of the Government.

¹³ This figure is an approximation based on the exchange rate at the time of this conversation.

¹⁴ In Sinhala *hita* signifies both (what we would describe in English separately) the mind and the heart. *Hita* is where emotions are created, stored, and felt, but also where thoughts are developed.

One friend who was desperate to work in the Middle-East, to provide a better life for his children as he told me, had been promised a job in Saudi Arabia. However, he was required to pay a hefty bribe (approximately £500) to the Government official in charge of allocating the posts, and through him another heftier bribe to the Government minister who had brokered the employment deal with the Saudi Arabian authorities. Having pawned his wife's jewellery and borrowed heavily from the bank and from relatives and friends, he finally managed to pay the bribes and numerous other dubious fees requested by the Foreign Employment Ministry. Despite all this, he was given neither the promised employment nor a refund for the bribes and fees. The last time I saw him he was very disillusioned with life, having been cheated by the state and ending up in a worse economic situation than before. While corruption and bureaucracy are issues that all Sri Lankans (without the relevant political connections) have to deal with, its intensity varies according to one's status in society. Many of my research participants from rural and semi-urban marginalised backgrounds were often subjected to the worst of it. Interestingly, political corruption was cited as one of the key factors that had motivated many of them to take up arms against the state in their youth.

Trust and Access

The context in which I was carrying out my research was one where corruption, impunity, and state-sponsored violence reigned. In addition, the civil war that raged in the North between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Government brought itself to life in the South through LTTE suicide bombers detonating themselves in public spaces, wreaking devastation and panic. An increasingly authoritarian regime intolerant of criticism created an environment in which people were frightened to discuss sensitive politics with strangers. The appearance of white vans without number-plates brought back harrowing memories of the 'white-van abduction syndrome' of the *Bheeshanaya*. News of Sinhala people being abducted in broad daylight, widely rumoured to be state or politically-sponsored, led to a further muzzling of potential research participants. In such a climate, trust proved vital in chipping away at the silence that shrouded this subject. The narratives featured in this thesis are the product of that trust, but remain peppered with gaps, and bouts of fear.

Finding those whose personal history was linked to insurgency proved somewhat problematic to begin with since many people were unwilling to identify themselves as former insurgents and hesitant to talk about the Terror. As one former insurgent Nikhil, admitted to me:

A lot of people don't want to remember the past...there is an element of shame about being a JVPer. Now being identified as a JVPer (from that time) is a joke for people. They tease us and ask what we were doing. That all we did was try and attack the Government twice and failed...So some people don't like to say that they were JVPers.

Many people were suspicious of my motives. In his work on survivors of violence, Perera (2001) points to silence and the collapse of trust as legacies of the Terror. He states that fear of the past repeating itself and the difficulty of trusting strangers (such as researchers) when people could not even trust members of their own community, and the perception that those who have not experienced what they have would not understand or care, contribute to the fear (2001: 159-169). I also found the post-terror environment of impunity in which 'perpetrators', 'victims', and 'witnesses' of violence were all forced to share the same, small, awkward spaces, and the sense of taboo surrounding the *Bheeshanaya* further contributed to people's disinclination to speak of the past.

In the prevailing climate of silence and fear, I utilised trust-networks to access potential research participants, and made extensive use of the snow-balling technique to widen my research participant group. I devised a three-tiered consent and access strategy. Given the sensitivity of the research I wanted to allow ample opportunity for people to think through consent and to withdraw it if they so wished. First, my mutual contact would visit a potential research participant to tell him about me, my research, and to provide some reassurance about my trustworthiness. On their agreement to meet me, he or she would then accompany me to a brief introductory meeting where my potential research participant would be given an opportunity to 'suss me out'. Here I would explain the purpose of my research and seek consent, and set a date for an interview, which provided enough of a time-gap to allow research participants to

withdraw their consent. After my first proper interview I found it fairly easy to set follow-up interviews.

In most cases our first interview entailed my being subjected to a ‘grilling’ session by a potential research participant to extract any hidden motives and political allegiances that I may have been secretly harbouring. On one such occasion I sat opposite a potential research participant, attempting to tackle his volley of questions and accusations, while feeling the suspicious eyes of Che Guevara and Rohana Wijeweera boring into me from the posters that adorned his walls. His tone was harsh, and his confrontational mode of questioning was clearly an attempt to catch me out. He emphatically stated over and over again, “I don’t know how honest (*avanka*) you are”. Suspicions of my ‘real motive’ for carrying out research on this topic were expressed by drawing comparisons with politicians and NGOs who “come with their private agendas... focussed purely on money and power”.¹⁵ This was typical of many of the initial ‘trust-tests’ I endured and successfully passed.

The sensitivity of the research context and the challenges to access this posed, along with my desire to ensure a carefully thought-out access strategy that placed trust, ethical considerations, and the safety of research participants at the centre, led to some initial delays in starting the process of interviewing. My first introduction to a former insurgent took place approximately six to seven months after I had arrived in the field, and the snow-balling technique was necessarily localised, given the particular circumstances of this sensitive research.

The building of trust between myself and research participants was a gradual process. I was truthful about my research and motivations, and open to questions about myself. Trust here entailed obligation and expectation. My research participants expected that by placing their trust in me and by sharing their stories with me, I would carry out my obligation to protect their identities and ensure that no harm would come to them as a result of my research. The credibility that those who introduced me to research participants offered, my manner of interacting with them, how I positioned myself, and how they in turn situated me, were crucial aspects of the trust-building process.

¹⁵ In the aftermath of the tsunami disaster, the South was inundated with NGOs and people in this region had close and direct dealings with various international and local NGOs. Some of these NGOs were (and continue to be) involved in corruption and unethical modes of operation (e.g. proselytising NGOs that provided aid in return for conversion, or those that only provided relief to Christian victims of the tsunami), earning NGOs overall a bad reputation. During my fieldwork I found many people likening NGOs to their corrupt, exploitative, and power-hungry political leaders.

Native or Foreign Anthropologist?

Peacock contends that developing relationships of trust does not open a “magic door” to valid truthful data. He argues that what the researcher is allowed to see will depend on how he or she is defined as a person, and how his or her role is socially situated by others (2001: 85). My positioning in the field and how others situated me was complex and transient. It had a significant impact on my access to research participants, the level of trust they placed in me, and on the type of information I was able to obtain.

So here I was returning to my country of origin to carry out this fieldwork, with little that tied me to it except for memories and relatives, and a level of Sinhala that could benefit from much improvement. The ‘native-insider’ versus ‘foreign-outsider’ dichotomy that was born of the colonial era has recently been taken to task by scholars, who point to cultural complexity and the diversity that exists within people, groups, and cultures (see Narayan 2002, Aguilar 1981, Abu-Lughod 1988). Narayan (2002) emphasises the multiplex and shifting nature of identities, and the ways in which people can simultaneously be ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. Being ‘native’ certainly did not make me feel like an ‘insider’. Admittedly, it helped that I shared religious values with my research participants and that I had an almost instinctive understanding of some of their cultural mores. However, I was also acutely aware that I was far removed from them in terms of class, language, and life-style. Unlike that of my research participants, my upbringing in urban Colombo was privileged, my first language was English, and the lifestyle of my family had more in common with those in the ‘Western world’ than it did with their Sri Lankan counterparts in rural and semi-urban areas. So where would I fit in the insider-outsider debate? In the reality of the field I benefited from being both, and from consciously and subconsciously drawing on the various aspects of my fluid identity depending on the context.

In the early days of my fieldwork, I was very much aware of being an ‘outsider’. In an eager effort to ‘fit in’ and be accepted I made an effort to ‘be more Sri Lankan’ (e.g., altering my dress, my accent, and certain mannerisms). This attempt to go somewhat ‘native’ was also fuelled to an extent by the crude taunts of a cheeky young local whose clichéd term “coconut” summed up my self-consciousness at appearing somewhat Sri Lankan but very much an outsider. “Coconut”, he explained gleefully, meant “brown on the outside, white on the inside”. However, I was surprised when my careful efforts seemed only to frighten off and further silence

potential research participants. It was then that I began to realise the importance of my ‘foreignness’ to the process of building trust and enabling people to feel comfortable in talking candidly about their experiences. It meant that I was genuinely from ‘outside’ and thereby not a spy for the CID (Criminal Investigation Department of police) or some political party. Importantly, I was also then deemed to have fewer preconceptions and biases than a ‘local’ researcher, and not to be as embroiled in local political and social dynamics surrounding the *Bheeshanaya*.

This ‘outsider-foreign’ aspect had a tempering effect on certain personal characteristics I originally feared might prove to be a hindrance to developing a trusting relationship with my research participants. My name and certain mannerisms instantly gave away some of these characteristics to other Sri Lankans. My access to an English education, my privileged background, and caste, represented the very sources of marginalisation and social injustice that many ex-insurgents believed they were fighting against in the 1980s. Simultaneously, other personal characteristics such as my ethnic background and religion endeared me to potential research participants, who always substantiated my religious background before embarking on candid critiques of “our religion” and “our monks” (i.e., Buddhism and Buddhist monks), or established my ethnic background before expressing their views on the conflict between the state and the LTTE. Throughout my field experience I was constantly subduing some aspects of my identity while intensifying others.

I was also aware of the many instances in which people attempted to manipulate and define my identity, to my amusement and occasional bemusement. Situating me also seemed to pose a dilemma for some people. Members of the security forces who scrutinised my passport at checkpoints would tell me that since I had a Sinhala name I *was* Sinhala. The local researcher who told me that she was “fed up of foreigners coming here to study Sri Lanka”, clearly situated me as an ‘outsider’. Consider the plight of my confused landlady who felt that I was foreign enough to criticise the less desirable behaviour of Sri Lankan people (hence her refusal to take in local tenants), while simultaneously construing me as local enough to complain about the ‘dodgy’ habits of her foreign tenants.

Most importantly, and to the benefit of this study, my research participants seemed to situate me somewhere in between. Research participants actively manipulated my characteristics to suit their circumstances. For example, my vegan lifestyle was (wrongly) interpreted emphatically as an act of Buddhist piety, with one suspicious potential research participant even telling our mutual contact with a

relieved smile, “If she doesn’t harm animals, then of course there is no way that she will cause harm to people like us. As Buddhists we should all follow that example”. People actively manipulated my identity and often positioned me in a manner that provided themselves with reassurance of their own personal judgement of my trustworthiness and their agreement to participate in my research. Being able to benefit from being both the ‘native-insider’ and the ‘foreign-outsider’ brought forth the rich narratives that inform this thesis.

Representing Former Insurgents, Writing about Violence, and Some Ethical Dilemmas

The safety of my research participants continues to be of paramount concern. Many expressed fear of reprisals by ‘torturers’ who lived nearby (some of whom continue to hold positions of power) or by those whose families had been harmed by the JVP during the *Bheeshanaya*. Others expressed fear of JVP attacks. In a continuing environment of impunity, corruption, and violence, the prospect of harm to a research participant or their family continues to be very real. All research participants and places have been anonymised and stripped of personal identifiers. The responsibility I have towards ensuring the safety of my research participants underlies my decision to provide minimal context to their individual quotes in this thesis. Where descriptive details of research participants are available, these have been made deliberately misleading to prevent identification, while taking care to ensure that this does not affect the quality and validity of the data.

Carrying out sensitive research with ‘vulnerable’ people is obviously ethically charged. Asking people to remember and reflect on a disturbing period of their life and to recount painful experiences left me with a constant sense of unease, as to the impact this may have on the mental well-being of my informants. As interviews progressed, I felt that some people were finding new ways of looking at their experiences by talking about them with an outsider. However, at other times I felt that the process of unearthing difficult memories may have detrimental consequences for the subject’s well-being. On such occasions depending on the context, I would change the line of inquiry, remind them of their right not to talk about things that they were not comfortable with and to withdraw consent, take a break, or make a decision to not continue the research with them. I was carefully sensitive to any signs (e.g., body

language), which would indicate that a particular line of inquiry was having a negative impact on my research participants' mental well-being. Overall however, as a researcher and human being, it was a personal and moral judgement I had to make on such occasions, by taking careful account of the individual concerned and the context.

A deeper understanding of the uncomfortable historical relationship between anthropology and colonisation, greater awareness of human rights, and the ability of the people studied themselves to read and critique what is written about them, have brought ethical and political concerns regarding representation and writing about violence to the fore of anthropological debate over the past two decades. In Tarlo's (2003) work on the Emergency in India, she recounts an incident that took place during her fieldwork which, as well as providing a visual critique of the power relationship between the researcher and participants, also presents the problem of representation. Here, a drunken man interrupts an interview she is carrying out with a member of the slum community to hand her a piece of paper randomly strewn with his squiggles in Hindi. This leads her to contemplate how one can "reduce a person's life into a series of squiggles, and that in a language that the person does not even understand" (2003: 124). This incident also seems to put a question-mark over the whole process of ethnographic fieldwork – the right of someone to enter and disrupt other people's lives, and to unearth and write about private and uncomfortable memories. The inherent power structures of the relationship between researcher and participants remain skewed with the ultimate power over what is written and how it is written lying in the hands of the researcher.

Nevertheless, as I found in my own fieldwork, research participants create various avenues through which to exercise some power and leverage in the research process. This was largely exerted through what people chose to tell me, how they said it, and what they chose to withhold. Interviews and conversations followed a direction that was primarily set by the teller, with silences and gaps often marking subjects that they wished to avoid. Research participants had their own agendas for telling, and their narratives were often structured in ways that they believed would best meet these purposes. As we shall see through the stories that run through this thesis, former insurgents spoke in frames of victimhood and in the main refused to talk about their own complicity in violence. Their memories were mediated in a manner that enabled them to project a carefully constructed representation of themselves and their pasts through narrative. Furthermore, when I embarked on my fieldwork, the intense

grilling-sessions that I was subjected to by potential research participants made me acutely aware of the power in our relationship being weighted in their favour at this point of the research process, as I tried to convince them of my trustworthiness and to persuade them to share their stories with me. In the relationship between research participants and myself as researcher, power was a phenomenon that constantly shifted from one party to another during the research process. However, it is inevitable that the ultimate power on writing and representation lies with me as the researcher. I have therefore endeavoured to exercise professionalism and ethical sensitivity, and to maintain respect for my research participants throughout this process.

Daniel contends that accounts of violence run the risk of taking on prurience (1996:4). Similarly, in her work with survivors of the Delhi riots, Das questions whether the author stands in a relationship of a voyeur to the narratives of suffering (1995: 33). Perera (1998, 1999) argues that studies that emphasise the counter-insurrectionary death squads or the JVP (which encompass my ex-insurgent and former counter-insurrectionary officer protagonists) could fall into this category and eclipse the experiences of survivors of terror, particularly women and children. He states that “unfortunately, for many academics experiences of women as well as children are perhaps less exciting, and less violent, and less graphic to deserve their academic attention (1999: 4 and 1998: 5). I would argue that any study on violence runs the risk of prurience, whether it focussed on ‘perpetrators’ or ‘survivors’ of violence (bearing in mind that these categories themselves are not mutually exclusive). Anthropologists of violence should be aware of such risks and guard against them throughout the process of writing. Das, in her study of female survivors of the Partition and the 1984 Delhi riots, rightly comments that “there is plenty of evidence of stories of victims and survivors that hook into a popular culture in which the trope of the ‘innocent’ victim provides the cover to engage in voyeurism” (2007: 211). Similarly, scholars have reminded us that despite research with ‘victims’ being ethically and methodologically easier to carry out, it also entails moral dilemmas of its own, with researchers who follow this path potentially being labelled anything from “bleeding heart liberals” or “voyeurs of suffering”, to “merchants in misery” (Cohen 2001, Foster et al. 2005).

This is not to say that the study of people who have participated in violence does not bring with it cumbersome ethical quandaries, particularly concerning issues of representation and ‘truth’. But if, as Spencer has argued, “Anthropology is above

all a repository of inconvenient facts” and an important part of our work entails acknowledging our “moral obligation to face up to the inconvenient” (1999: 7-8), then it would be both ethically and professionally unjustifiable to brush the perspectives of those who have engaged in violence under the carpet, simply because they are deemed less ‘worthy’ of our attention than other protagonists. My findings may, to varying degrees and to different people, be considered ‘inconvenient truths’. It challenges ‘comforting’ stereotypes of people who have engaged in monstrous acts of violence by showing them to be rational individuals (not much different to the rest of us) with the capacity to exercise moral judgement, thereby muddying the waters of clear-cut ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ labels (see Foster et al. 2005)

In approaching research with former insurgents and former counter-insurrectionary officers, I also feel it important to recognise the common humanity that we all share, and to avoid demonising those who resort to violent action for their cause. I agree with Levi who, in his study of Nazi concentration camps, warns of the imprudence of issuing hasty moral judgements, pointing to the “grey zone” of ambiguity that such situations radiate (2004: 83–91). Rather than being psychopathic monsters or evil agents (as is the sensationalist approach too often taken by the tabloid media) on the one hand, or simply ‘ordinary’ people carried away by the requirements of modern bureaucracy and bound to rules of obedience (see Arendt 1994, Browning 2001) on the other hand, the ‘perpetrators’ of violence featured in this study attest to the ambivalence of being human. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that to understand and explain the perspectives and actions of ‘perpetrators’ of violence does not amount to justifying their violence (Browning 2001).

Finally, I should mention here concerns that have been expressed about balancing theoretical analysis with human accounts of violence, and the danger of the former rendering insignificant the reality of violence. Daniel (1996) contends that flattening accounts of violence with theory offers an easy option to the researcher who wants to avoid the risk of them being fattened with prurience. However, he warns that the price of this is the betrayal of those who have communicated their stories to the anthropologist and through him or her to the outside world. The reality of violence is such that “a theory that purports to inform it must ... stand apart from it as a gesture of open admission to its inadequacy to measure up to the task” (1996: 6). While theory is necessary for analysis and a deeper understanding of violence, it should not drown out the human voices and lived reality of violence. With this in mind, I have tried to perform a delicate balancing act here, so that theory and the

human voice can inform and talk to each other. However, it must be acknowledged that this research is ultimately about the human experience of violence, and its value thereby lies in the rich empirical detail that substantiates its findings.

Truth, Memory, and Testimony

An important factor that motivated people to participate in this research was their desire to publicise the ‘truth’. I was charged by many former insurgents in particular, to use this research to challenge what they termed as the “biased” or “one-sided” official history of the Terror with what they termed as the “truth” or “what really happened”. Many former insurgents felt that the state narrative of the *Bheeshanaya* was one of silence, forgetting, and misrepresentation. They believed that media reports and the few studies available on the subject supported this version of history in discrediting the JVP insurgents and down-playing the violence of the counter-insurrection. Significantly, people overwhelmingly said that their own suffering and the violence of the *Bheeshanaya* had been ignored by both the local and international community, particularly when compared to the weight given to the ethnic conflict in the North. As such, they perceived their participation in this research as an opportunity to provide an alternative narrative or a ‘counter-truth’. The official narrative of the state has been subject to change over the years depending on the political parties in power. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that denial, and officially imposed silence and amnesia have characterised the tenures of the UNP regime, while governments led by its political opposition have also tended to ignore and ‘forget’ this era, resurrecting it occasionally during electoral campaigns for purposes of political expediency.

One former insurgent named Asthika, at the end of an intense ‘grilling session’ told me, “write honestly, a book that tells the truth about what happened to people like us. A study done properly on this will be important...Because the people who have done studies on this have been biased (towards the state narrative)”. The subjective ethnographer’s moral load here then is to write an ‘objective’ ethnography—an impossible task. I was met with a similar charge by Kirihami, another former insurgent, who put considerable effort into providing me with detailed information for the purposes of this research:

If we can make a small difference to young people. If the new generation can learn from our experiences, then that is the most important thing. Not much has been written about this insurrection. And the things that are there weigh heavily towards the opinion of the Government. You should write a book about us in Sinhala. To encourage our young people to read and learn from it ... If you can get people to read about this, then that is a huge thing.

People's pleas to publicise their stories and to tell the world the 'truth' suggested that they believed others to care about their experiences and the injustices that they had suffered (see Daniel 1996). Daniel's acknowledgement of the "impotency one feels" (1996: 4) in attempting the enormously difficult task of communicating violence holds true in my own work. This sense of "impotency" is further intensified in my case through a recognition that the end product of this research is merely a PhD thesis that will not entail the kind of wide circulation and publicity expected by my research participants to take their 'alternative truths' to the outside world.

The charges directed at me to publicise the 'truth', also left me with confusing questions as to whose truth, and what kind of truth to write. As this research unravelled it became evident that rather than the existence of one categorical 'truth' of the *Bheeshanaya*, there were instead a multiplicity of diverse 'truths', each carrying value, credibility, and meaning to the teller. Memory and oral narrative are deeply contested terrains. The imperfections and unreliability of memory have been highlighted in much academic research, and its use as a method for this study comes with my acknowledgement of its problems. However, this by no means diminishes its importance and usefulness as a means through which to study violence. Instead, I believe that through the vehicle of memory, we obtain a rich and nuanced insight into the convoluted human 'reality' of violence. In the course of this research, I have been forced to recognise that people's memories were representations of the past, and that they could not simply be accepted at face value. However, this is not to refute their 'truth' value, as each of the narratives set out in the following pages are versions or "pieces" of the 'truth' (see Butalia 2000).

I have not set out to write a history of the *Bheeshanaya*. This thesis is not an attempt to reconstruct a historical 'truth' of the Terror based on people's recollections and stories of it. This would be an impossible task in such an ethically and politically charged context, where 'truth' and 'historical fact' are subject to considerable

contestation. My aim here instead is to plot a constellation of different ‘truths’, sometimes contradictory and sometimes overlapping, all of which make up a larger reality of the *Bheeshanaya* as experienced by human beings whose lives were touched by its violence. Rather than a futile search for a non-existent and categorical ‘truth’ then, I believe that my efforts here are better spent on analysing the purposes that lie behind these ‘truths’, and people’s constructions and interpretations of it.

Langer, in his study of the oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors insightfully reminds us that since oral testimonies are “human documents rather than merely historical ones, the troubled interaction between the past and the present achieved a gravity that surpasses the concern with accuracy” (Langer 1991: xv). This research demonstrates that such an approach gives us insight into the meanings that people attach to violence and its implications for life in the aftermath. It is people’s memories and reflections of violence that add richness and depth to its lived reality, thereby providing the “human dimension” and bringing to light the “underside” of its history (see Butalia 2000, Thompson 2000).

Moreover, this approach allows historical ‘facts’ and assumed ‘truths’ to be challenged, and divulges their very subjectivity and constructed nature. Memory thereby contributes to a richer and more balanced version of the ‘history’ of the *Bheeshanaya*. The use of memory and oral narrative here has allowed me to bring out the alternative ‘truths’ belonging to a group whose voices have been ignored thus far (i.e., former JVP insurgents). Rather than comparing memory and history by placing them in opposition to each other, or suggesting that the former should be regarded as the sole method for excavating ‘truth’ and ‘history’, I would emphasise, as some scholars have done before me, the value of memory in supplementing history by offering a different and sometimes oppositional perspective to it, which in turn enriches historical ‘truth’ (Butalia 2000).

Finally, I must recognise that the memories around which this thesis is built were elicited by me as a researcher, rather than being spontaneous recollections arising from traditional participant observation – a method that was not practically or ethically feasible here due to the sensitivity of the subject. Nevertheless, it is important to note (and I hope this is evident from the stories to follow), that these memories reflected valid issues that people grappled with in their everyday lives, and that they always followed the priorities and direction set by research participants. Moreover, as this research progressed and trust was gradually established, memories

were more spontaneously volunteered, and my role in gently drawing them out diminished over time.

Limits of Research

I originally set out to seek the narratives of ex-insurgents, who duly comprised young men, women, and Buddhist monks who engaged in the insurrectionary violence of the 1980s. However, the practicalities of doing this research on the ground soon threw up access problems relating to female and Buddhist monk ex-insurgents. Female ex-insurgents were hesitant to participate in my research and refused to even be introduced to me, usually citing fear and domestic commitments as reasons for this decision. Similarly, Buddhist monks in the area were difficult to access. I found that many had been killed or had since disrobed and were difficult to trace. Others were not keen to meet me and engage in this research. The absence of the voices of women and Buddhist monks are limitations of this research. However, it is worth noting that the JVP insurgent group was predominantly made up of young lay men. This topic overall has been paid insufficient scholarly attention, and it will be for future ethnographers to build on this work and attempt to extract the stories of these groups.

Structure of Thesis

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. It is structured around the priorities of my research participants, which form the themes of each chapter.

Chapter one examines the ways in which people use the concept of ‘youth’ to remember and talk about their experiences of the *Bheeshanaya*. I argue that former insurgents draw on the idiom of ‘youth’ as a narrative strategy to explain their own involvement in the insurrection and to comprehend their experiences of violence. Through their narrative manipulation of this idiom, former insurgents reconstruct their violent pasts and project a specific representation of the self in moral terms. This in turn allows them to disassociate themselves from violence, and to deflect moral culpability for it.

Chapter two looks at the ways in which people mediate memories of a particularly morally burdensome nature. These are memories of what people commonly referred to as ‘opportunistic’ violence, which entailed acts of revenge and denunciation during the *Bheeshanaya*. I argue that these memories are morally irksome because they concern the perpetration of violence between ‘intimates’, and because of the personal (rather than political) nature of its motives. This in turn renders their mediation an ethical exercise, carrying important implications for notions of the self and sociality with others, in the present. I argue that people draw on memories of ‘opportunistic’ violence to comment on the impossibilities of ‘intimate’ social relationships in times of terror.

Chapter three considers the narratives of torture survivors (mostly comprised of former insurgents who were tortured by the state), paying attention to how the experience of torture is remembered and articulated. I argue that torture is both expressible and meaningful. In instances where people find difficult its verbal articulation, they creatively draw on alternative means of communication to express their memories of torture. Survivors keep the memory of torture alive in ethical terms and root its experience in ‘intimate’ social relationships, while further engaging in elaborate moral critiques of violence through their narrative expressions.

Chapter four turns to consider the memories of former counter-insurrectionary officers (‘perpetrators’ of state violence). I argue here that torture carries meaning for its ‘perpetrators’ (as well as its ‘victims’), which contributes to the very abhorrence of this particular form of violence. Former counter-insurrectionary officers, like survivors of torture, imbue their memories of torture with moral meanings, anchored in ideas of ‘intimacy’. They reject the category of ‘perpetrator’, instead making claims for the subject position of ‘victim’, interspersed with that of ‘hero’. Their narratives are structured around a language of denial, justification, and a deflection of moral responsibility for violence. In this sense they bear similarity to the accounts of former insurgents regarding their own complicity in insurrectionary violence, as seen in other chapters of this thesis.

Chapter 5 focuses on the possibilities of ‘intimacy’ amidst terror. It concerns people’s memories of ‘intimate’ relationships that surpassed the divisive violence of the *Bheeshanaya*. I argue that through the mediation of these memories, people create an

ethical space to come to terms with a violence whose source was awkwardly ‘close to the bone’, and to grapple with the sensitive task of appropriating accountability for it. In telling stories of social relationships that triumphed over terror, people engage in re-imaginings of an ‘intimate’ moral community post-terror.

Chapter 6 examines the ways in which former insurgents go about reformulating their worlds after violence. I argue that for ‘perpetrators’, the reclamation of life and sociality is steeped in the mundane, and that it is focussed largely on practical acts of reparation. The narratives in this chapter suggest that past violence entangles itself in the present in intricate and complex ways, impinging on the everyday lives of those embroiled in the ongoing exercise of reconstructing their social worlds. This in itself is a challenge that former insurgents must grapple with, in their efforts to recreate life after terror.

Chapter 7 considers the ways in which former insurgents draw on Buddhist ethics to give meaning to the violence of their past. Significantly, the Buddhist ethical framework of *karma* (the natural law of cause and effect) is employed in their efforts to appropriate moral responsibility for violence and to communicate notions of justice and retribution. I argue that *karma* provides a means through which former insurgents implicitly acknowledge some moral responsibility for violence. But in another sense, *karma* also functions as a redemptive discourse in people’s ambiguous narratives, in excusing ‘perpetrators’ from engaging in personal acts of ethical repair. In the stories that run through this chapter, we also find expressions of renewed religiosity and efforts by former insurgents to represent themselves as living virtuous Buddhist lives after terror. I argue that on the one hand, this conveys reassurances of a reformed moral character, which we may interpret as a step towards moral reparation and an implicit acknowledgement of wrongdoing. On the other hand, however, former insurgents also appear to use this as a narrative strategy to assert a discontinuity of the self and to distance themselves from their past violence, which amounts to a rejection of culpability. Finally, I end this thesis by arguing that the work of reconstructing worlds after terror, for those who have participated in violence, involves continuing to live with that past in the present in ethical terms, rather than ‘moving on’ from, or ‘getting over’, violence.

Chapter 1

The Violence of Youth

During my time in the field, I found the ‘youthful’ character of the JVP guerrillas featured consistently in people’s stories of the *Bheeshanaya*. Former insurgents would tell me that they were *taruna* (youth) at the time of the *Bheeshanaya*, and commonly put their motivations for participating in the insurgency down to what they called *tarunakama* (youthfulness). In present day Sri Lanka, the JVP insurrection is popularly remembered as a ‘youth rebellion’ fuelled by ‘youth unrest’ (*taruna asahanaya*). This ‘problem’ of ‘youth unrest’ featured in a brief flurry of popular and academic debate that took place in the aftermaths of both insurgencies, and in 1989 a ‘Presidential Commission on Youth’ was set up to investigate the causes of youth discontentment that had led to the second JVP insurgency. In this chapter we find that in a post-terror climate of silence, fear, and amnesia, the idiom of ‘youth’ functioned as a relatively safe repository for memories of violence.

The Sinhala term *taruna* may be glossed as “young hopeful” or “one with potential”, but it is also often regarded with disdain and associated with immaturity, dependence, and lacking responsibilities (Ibarguen 2004, Hettige 1992). Scholars have argued that ‘youth’ overall is a subjective and liminal category that attracts much ambivalence from those who fall outside its bio-social descriptors (see West 2000, Ibarguen 2004, Centre for Anthropology and Sociological Studies 2000). Peoples’ construction of *tarunakama*, which they imbued with powerful meanings both of a positive and negative nature, reflected this ambiguity. This in turn carried implications for notions of the self and for moral responsibility for violence, in the present.

Scholars have shown that memory is commonly invoked to heal, blame, and legitimate the past, and that it plays a significant role in the construction of identity (Antze and Lambek 1996: xii). In this chapter, I consider the ways in which former insurgents drew on the idiom of ‘youth’ as a narrative strategy to rationalise and give meaning to their violent pasts, and to grapple with issues of accountability. I argue that their narrative manipulation of ‘youth’ enabled former insurgents to reconstruct their violent pasts, and to project a particular representation of themselves, which was grounded in the moral. Moreover, by negotiating their memories through the idiom of ‘youth’, former insurgents engaged in a form of disassociation from violence and a deflection of moral culpability for it. In other words, while not denying outright their

involvement in violence, former insurgents at the same time refused to acknowledge moral responsibility for it.

I argue that former insurgents refashioned notions of the self in relation to their unsettling pasts through the idiom of ‘youth’, in a manner that allowed them to continue living with their memories of violence in the aftermath. This narrative strategy then functioned as a coping mechanism, and provided a means of dealing with the consequences of their actions in a post-terror environment where reconciliation and justice were not forthcoming. As such, my research substantiates Jackson’s contention that people reinvent themselves and rework reality through the telling of stories in order to make it bearable (2002: 16). This thesis further attests to arguments put forward by scholars that memory is never morally neutral (see Kirmayer 1996, Antze 1996, Lambek 1996, Taylor 1989).

Restless Youth in Southern Sri Lanka

The National Youth Services Council offers a bio-social categorisation of ‘youth’ in Sri Lanka and defines its age parameters to be between 14 and 29 years, although in some instances this can extend to 35 years, with marriage and ‘stable’ employment being considered a departure from youth (see Ibarguen 2004, Hettige and Mayer 2002, Hettige 1992). In Sri Lanka (as in other parts of the world) the diversity which ‘youth’ encompasses in terms of class, ethnicity, religion, geographic location, and caste, has led scholars to rightly point out the varied and contextual nature of youth experience (see Hettige 1992). Furthermore, the difficulty of pinning ‘youth’ down as a general topic for analysis has been highlighted by Durham, in the context of African studies on youth, who notes youth to be “a very shifty category that seems to fit many people at some time but no one consistent” (2000: 116). She urges us instead to think of youth as a “social shifter” which situates it “in a social landscape of power, rights, expectations, and relationships – indexing both themselves and the topology of that social landscape”, rather than trying to define it as a bio-social category (2000: 116). Former insurgents, whose delineations of ‘youth’ we shall shortly consider, largely depicted it as a bio-social and temporal category, which they in turn inscribed with specific affective characteristics and cultural meanings.

Some scholars have rightly argued that explaining away the insurgencies in the North and South of Sri Lanka as ‘ethnic’ or ‘youth’ problems detracts attention

from the economic and political issues that result in social discrimination, which lie at the root of young people's readiness to engage in political violence against the state (see Cohen 1997, Hettige and Mayer 2002). The Presidential Commission on Youth published its somewhat hurried report in 1990, with recommendations for reforms in education and employment, for democratisation of the state, and to address the abuse of political power. Its findings, which have been backed by other studies (Centre for Anthropology and Sociological Studies 2000, Hettige 1992, Gunaratna 1990), remain relevant but continue to be ignored due to a lack of political will.

The causes that led young Sinhala people to attempt to violently overthrow the state in the late 1980s were largely based on valid social and political grievances. I touch on these complex issues only briefly here to provide background to the wider discussion on how people reflected on their involvement in the insurgency, as they have been recorded elsewhere (Alles 1990, Hettige 1992, Uyangoda 1992, Presidential Commission 1990, Gunaratna 1990, Chandraprema 1991).

Among the widely affirmed causes of 'youth unrest' were political corruption and the excessive politicisation of society that in turn engendered social discrimination (e.g., political clientelism in employment). The perception of the state as being untrustworthy and elitist, along with its ready use of violence to suppress its citizens, led to a sense of disillusionment among many young people, particularly those of socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, the poverty gap (in particular rural poverty) and the acute class disparity, along with problems of unemployment (significantly, educated unemployment), and a fundamental disjuncture between youth aspirations and available opportunities, have been identified as factors that led to the insurrection.

In addition, problems specific to the education system, including the lack of adequate resources for schools in deprived rural areas, the politicisation of the education system, and barriers faced by youth (mainly from socially disadvantaged backgrounds), who are products of state-sponsored monolingual (*swabhāsha*) education when they enter the field of employment (due to the privileged position given to the English language), impelled young people to participate in the JVP insurrection. The latter issue in particular has led to further polarisation between *swabhasha* educated youth and their English-educated urban peers of wealthier background.

The harsh reality of frustrated aspirations and social discrimination for the majority of young people in Sri Lanka continue to form the basis of their youthful

experience, as I found during my time in the field. The JVP's revolutionary ideology spoke to these very issues in a way that other more 'out-of-touch' elitist political parties in the mainstream, did not. These issues were passionately cited by former insurgents as fuelling their initial motivations to participate in an attempt at revolution, and examples of personal experiences of poverty, social discrimination, state violence, and political corruption, were drawn on in this process. All the former insurgents I spoke to claimed their goal to be that of overthrowing a corrupt and unjust regime, in order to replace it with a state based on justice and equality. However, these causes of 'youth unrest' were by no means offered as the sole or most significant factors that motivated their decision to take up arms against the state, nor did they feature elaborately in the recollection of their experiences.

In hindsight, former insurgents overwhelmingly reflected on their involvement in the insurrection in terms of their 'youthfulness' (*tarunakama*). Through this, they went on to project a particular representation of the kind of 'youthful' insurgents they were, and demonstrated how this shaped their experiences of violence. Rather than subscribing whole-heartedly to the valid causes of 'youth unrest' identified in literature on the subject as being the prime motivators of their involvement in violence, former insurgents drew on the constructed concept of *tarunakama* to give meaning to their relationship with violence and to allocate an ethical space for it post-terror.

The Portrayal of Youth in Master Narratives and Existing Literature

Former insurgents' depictions of the kind of youth who participated in the JVP insurrection were to an extent founded on certain aspects borrowed from existing notions of youth found in the master narratives, and in debates and studies on the *Bheeshanaya*. The master narrative of the state has been subject to change over the years, depending on the political party in power. However, it is fair to say that the state narrative on the Terror overall, like the less influential master narrative of the JVP, is marked by silence, forgetting, and a denial of its part in instigating violence. At the time of writing up this research, the JVP's international website provided a history of the movement in which its own silence on the *Bheeshanaya* was palpable. While it provides details on the 1971 uprising that include its motivations and the

number of insurgents killed and detained, its reference to the second insurgency merely (and somewhat obscurely) states:

During that time, there was a complex political environment in the country and the state suppression was intensified. Comrade Rohana Wijeweera was arrested and on the 13th of November 1989 and was murdered while in custody.

Both the state and JVP master narratives construct a particular stereotype of the JVP insurgent, which is built around the concept of 'youth'. According to the state narrative, the insurrection was a 'youth rebellion' in which 'restless youth' with certain grievances were 'misled' into joining a rebellion against the state, and exploited by the JVP for its own political ends. Exposed to violence and power, these young 'subversives', who included criminal elements, went on the rampage posing a threat to democracy and Sinhala society. This narrative is largely backed by the media and powerful elites, and supported to an extent by some studies on the subject - mainly literature charting the course of the insurrection that was published in the immediate aftermath of the *Bheeshanaya* (see Chandraprema 1991, Alles 1990, Gunaratna 1990).

The portrayal of youth in the official state narrative, and in some of the literature on this topic, throws negative light on the category of insurgent youth as a group of actors. It patronisingly implies that the youth who participated in the insurgency were gullible (idealistic and easily led), immature (predisposed to 'rebel'), and devoid of agency. Chandraprema (1991), a journalist who reported on the unfolding insurrection in the print media and who further published a book on the JVP insurgency towards the tail-end of the Terror, for instance, speaks of down-trodden "desperados" (i.e., unemployed, rural youth) being manipulated by a "ruthless" JVP leadership. He even goes as far as referring to JVP insurgents as "hard-boiled *yakkos*" (uncouth thugs or demons) (1991: 314). Gunaratna (1990) who pays more attention than Chandraprema to the grievances of youth that drew them to the JVP similarly refers to "frustrated youth" being "misled" by the JVP. Perera, an anthropologist who focuses on the experiences of female survivors of the Terror, in a similar vein refers to JVP insurgents as, "idealistic young rebels supposedly dedicated to usher in a brave new world (who) became indiscriminate killers" (1999: 19).

The JVP narrative on the other hand presents itself as having been the vanguard of the youth and portrays former insurgents in heroic terms. The JVP holds an annual ‘heroes’ day to commemorate its cadres who were killed in the *Bheeshanaya*. At the ‘heroes’ day that I attended during my time in the field, JVP insurgents were remembered as having been courageous, socially conscious, and filled with the energy of youth, and as having selflessly sacrificed their lives for the betterment of society. Former insurgents who participated in this research drew on some aspects of these depictions of youth, while rejecting others, in their reconstructions of the past, as we shall see in the following narratives.

‘Youth’ as Conveyer of Unpopular Memories

Not all former insurgents I interviewed technically fell into the bio-social category of ‘youth’ during their involvement in the 1980s insurrection. Some had also participated in the 1971 JVP uprising and were in their 30s or 40s, sometimes married with young families, when it came to their involvement in the second insurrection. Nevertheless, many ex-insurgents remembered their lives during the Terror in terms of their youth. They described the JVP as being a party for the youth – full of energy and dynamism, and in touch with the problems faced by the vast majority of young Sinhala people. They recounted their own experiences of the *Bheeshanaya* as stories of their youth, in both painful and nostalgic terms.

At the time of conducting this research, the reality on the ground was one of increasing state repression and intolerance of political criticism. This served to intensify people’s fear of discussing any issue deemed politically sensitive (let alone the *Bheeshanaya*). Moreover, the ethical ambiguity surrounding the violence of the *Bheeshanaya* further rendered the resurrection of its discomfiting memory all the more complicated, compared to other contexts of violence such as that of the Holocaust, which was clearly judged to be a human catastrophe with identifiable ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victims’ in its aftermath (see Kirmayer 1996, Langer 1991).

As Donnan and Simpson (2007) point out in their study on how border Protestants in Northern Ireland recall or remain reticent about violence, the challenge lies not in recalling one’s horrific past, but in *how* to recall it. The problem facing many ‘perpetrators’ of violence then, was that of moving these ethically and politically loaded memories from the private sphere of silence and forgetting, into the

public realm of remembering and telling. I argue that the idiom of ‘youth’ functioned as a relatively safe narrative strategy for beginning the work of mediating unpopular memories. In other words, it made “traumatic stories tell-able” (Donnan and Simpson 2007: 22) and provided a space for the reworking of memory in a highly charged and convoluted post-terror environment.

Often, in an attempt to put people at ease, I would open an interview with a relatively innocuous and broad question along the lines of, “What do you remember of the *Bheeshanaya*?” to which former insurgents would commonly respond with a reference to their youth. This would frequently be followed by stories of their involvement in the insurrection, which they would hook onto this notion of ‘youth’. For instance, Rahula a 35 year old mason, who had joined the JVP insurrection as a school boy, responded with:

You know, it was those youthful years [smiles]...At school I was well-known for my art-work. One day my friends asked me to draw some posters with them. I thought we were just drawing some anti-Indira Gandhi posters. I didn’t know it was for the JVP. Through that, I was drawn to it (participating in the insurrection).

In prefacing his story with, “You know it was those youthful years” accompanied by what appeared to be an indulgent smile, Rahula conveyed the concept of ‘youth’ to be loaded with meaning, which in turn suggests that it had narrative functions other than the mere facilitation of easing people into their stories. Rahula implies this temporal category of ‘youth’ to carry special meaning and to have played a significant role in his involvement in the insurrection.

This is not to say that socio-economic and political grievances underlying the motivations of the insurrection were entirely dismissed by former insurgents. These issues were to a large extent tacitly or explicitly affirmed in people’s narratives. Nevertheless, it was ‘youthfulness’ (*tarunakama*) that the vast majority of former insurgents consistently emphasised when reflecting on their participation in the insurrection some twenty years on from the *Bheeshanaya*.

Through their narratives, former insurgents (and many who ‘witnessed’ the violence) imbued the concept of *tarunakama* with a heady mix of negative and positive meanings, which they described as having coloured their own experiences of violence. I was told that being a youth entailed characteristics such as courage,

dynamism, energy, and enthusiasm, which propelled young people to actively pursue change. The thirst for new experiences in one's youth was emphasised by Kirihami, a former insurgent who told me: "when you are a youth you like to grasp new things [makes a grasping motion with his hands]. I got involved in the JVP for my *tarunakama* and its need to get involved in new experiences".

By referring to his "youthful *need*" for new experiences, Kirihami implies some of these characteristics to be instinctive and to diminish a young person's agency. In other words, Kirihami appears to intimate that those who occupy the temporal category of youth cannot be held entirely responsible for their actions, due to the strong pull and tug of youthful traits that they are subjected to. *Tarunakama* was also construed as a time of heightened social awareness and emotionality, intensifying sensitivity to issues such as social injustice. As Kavindu, another former insurgent who had long since left the JVP put it, "When you are young things like injustice and inequality really get to you. You feel it here so strong [taps his chest with a clenched fist]. You want to do something about it".

However, being youthful also apparently brought with it the burden of negative qualities, which people explained to me as being naivety, irresponsibility, impulsiveness, obsession with social image, the inability to foresee the consequences of one's actions, an attraction to weapons, bravado, emotionality/quickness to anger (*āvēgashīli*), and being 'up for scraps' (*valiyaṭa bara*). Many former insurgents who had left the JVP told me that being a youthful party itself, the JVP (leadership) was aware of these qualities and often targeted them in their mobilisation efforts.

***Tarunakama* as a Motivator of Violence**

Kavindu drew on *tarunakama* to frame his motivations for participating in the JVP insurrection as follows.

I was doing my A' levels at the time. So, I was a prime target for that kind of thing (insurgent activity)...The JVP was a party for the youth. The youth were attracted to it because of the language they used, the way they spoke, and the kinds of things they wanted people to do, like go and smash things up. I had so much energy in those days. When you are young you want to smash things up, to be a part of it. And you don't have much other responsibility... I wanted to change things. I liked their ideas (because) they believed in creating an equal

society. I felt angry when I saw how rich some people were, and how poor others were... if you didn't know (speak) English you were ridiculed. I was angry about that. I remember once I threatened a police guy who I had gone to school with. He left school after his O' levels and joined the police, but I continued my education and finished my A' levels. During the *kalabala kālaya* (period of chaos) I went up to him in my scheme (housing estate) and physically threatened him. I warned him not to take any of my friends in for questioning. He then grabbed me by the neck and slammed me against the wall and threatened to take me in (to detention) and kill me [laughs]. At that time it was about *chandikama* (thuggery) also. I was young. I wanted people to know. Because when I wore a red T-shirt and said I was a JVPer people were scared.¹⁶

An assortment of negative and positive characteristics ascribed to 'youthfulness' crop up throughout Kavindu's narrative, ranging from courage, energy, and a concern for social justice, to obsession with image, bravado, being up for scraps, and irresponsibility. He clearly suggests *tarunakama* and its contradictory experience to have contributed to his decision to engage in the insurrection. At certain points in his narrative Kavindu divests his youthful years of agency (e.g., by claiming JVP manipulation), while at other points he talks of being deeply affected by social injustice and wishing to effect change. Kavindu shows his 'youthfulness' to involve emotional intensity – anger and frustration at social injustice, which in turn fuels his desire to participate in insurrectionary violence. Social discrimination engendered by the privileged position allocated to the English language, which has been highlighted in existing studies as motivating Sinhala youth to take up arms, is also mentioned by Kavindu. However, it is situated within the wider frame of *tarunakama*.

Through his story, Kavindu further paints a particular picture of the kind of young insurgent he was, by drawing on attributes of 'youthfulness'. He represents himself as having been sensitive and keenly aware of social injustice, educated (he makes it a point to state that he had completed his A' levels while his peer in the police had merely studied up to his O' levels), full of bravado, somewhat naive and easily led, and carrying many of the usual traits of 'youthfulness'. Kavindu relates his story with an air of nostalgia, indulgently laughing at his youthful escapades of acting the 'hard-man' in his housing estate. He shows his own life as an insurgent to involve ambiguous youthful experiences and emotions (e.g., showing off to friends and

¹⁶ Red is the colour of the JVP and symbolised its revolution during the 1980s.

beating people up on the one hand, and being sensitive and deeply affected by social injustice on the other hand).

Kavindu explains his involvement in the insurrection in terms of his youthful lack of responsibility, “When you are young ...you don’t have much other responsibility”. In Kavindu’s case in particular, this struck me as rather odd given that his childhood was far from being bereft of responsibility. Following the death of his parents, as a child Kavindu had taken on responsibility for looking after his younger siblings in conditions of grinding poverty. In fact, he took his responsibility towards his young siblings so seriously that he left the JVP part-way through the *Bheeshanaya* due to his fear of their being destitute were he to be killed. What Kavindu (like many other ex-insurgents I spoke to) seemed to be doing here was to suggest that they could not be held morally responsible for the actions they took in their youth, under the influence of *tarunakama*. In drawing a clear distinction between his life now as a responsible adult and his life then as an irresponsible and emotional youthful insurgent, Kavindu was putting distance between the person he was now, and his past as a ‘youthful’ insurgent.

This form of narrative rationalisation raises questions about the continuity of the self and about moral responsibility for violence committed in the past. Kavindu, like many other insurgents, through his reconstruction of memory appears to be saying that as an adult he is not the same person that he was during his youth, and so implies that he cannot be held responsible for the actions he committed in his youth. In doing so he suggests a discontinuity of the self. This echoes arguments put forward by philosophers such as Hume and the Buddha who reject the notion of a continuing identity and a permanent conception of the self. Buddhism emphasises the transient nature of the self and its lack of ego. As one Buddhist monk put it to me: “You are not the person who came to see me yesterday because the thoughts and experiences you have had since then have changed you. We are all in a constant state of flux and everything is impermanent”. For Hume, the self is a series of experiences and our feigned conception of a continuing self is based on the memory and imagination that connects us to our past (Sirswal N.d). Scholars of memory have argued that the evocation of memory signals association and continuity. Memory presupposes a continuity of identity so that we feel the person who committed a crime in the past is the same person who should be held accountable today (Antze and Lambek 1996: xxv). What former insurgents like Kavindu seemed to be suggesting was the redundancy of moral culpability and a discontinuation of the self through their

reworking of memory. They remembered their involvement in the insurrection to have taken place during their youth when they were particularly susceptible to violence, and when they were different people from now.

Good and Bad Insurgents: Refashioning the Self and Deflecting Blame

Remembering violence has deep moral and practical implications for the self and one's relationship with others in the present. This was reflected in the ways in which people portrayed themselves as the type of insurgents they were during the *Bheeshanaya*. Through their utilisation of 'youth', former insurgents carefully constructed two distinct categories of insurgent youth, which were grounded in the moral.

One cohort of youth they remembered as being the genuine revolutionaries, driven to participate in the insurrection by a selfless commitment to its honourable goals. As Kavindu put it to me, "It was not just youth. It was youth and education. They were youth who knew and thought about things". People overwhelmingly drew on specific words to describe these moral insurgents, and through that went on to project a particular representation of themselves. I was told that these youth were *daksa* (talented), *buddimat* (learned or knowledgeable), *ugat* (educated), and having *avabōdaya* (knowledge, understanding, or awareness). When people like Kavindu used the term 'educated', they did not necessarily mean formal education. Instead, they were suggesting something broader – young people who were 'thinkers', and had cultivated a sense of social, political, and ethical awareness.

Invariably all former insurgents that I spoke to remembered themselves as having belonged to this 'moralistic' youth cadre. Through their use of these terms they carved out a particular niche for themselves in the violent past as 'good' insurgents who were 'educated', in possession of a social and ethical conscience, with the capacity to analyse the world around them. It was in these terms that former insurgents remembered and perceived themselves.

Former insurgents drew on these terms to sharpen the distinction between themselves and the 'undesirable' or 'immoral' youth who had apparently joined the JVP in their droves without any real understanding of, or commitment to, the honourable cause of the revolution. The word most commonly used by people to describe this youth cohort was *rālla*, which may be translated as herd. Its use here

suggests young people lacking the capacity to think for themselves, and gormlessly following the herd. As we shall see from the narratives in this section, it was the *rālla* that former insurgents held accountable for violence.

Nalanda is a former local insurgent leader who is now in his early 40s, and continues to be politically active within the JVP. Having asserted his own ‘honest’ (*avanka*) motivations for joining the insurrection, which he told me were grounded in concerns about social injustice and political corruption, Nalanda went on to state that some young people signed up to the JVP under the influence of the negative traits of ‘youthfulness’. He blamed this for the ultimate failure of the JVP insurrection. An extract of Nalanda’s story is as follows.

Being a youth without a doubt had an impact on people participating in the insurrection. Many youth tend to have a war-like mentality (*yudda mānasikatvaya*). They like weapons. A lot of young people were attracted to the JVP because of the weapons. They are the ones who brought us all down. They made the JVP look bad and people got fed up of us. I’ll give you an example. A group of us on foot once went to collect identity cards from a house.¹⁷ The young son of the family whose house we went to was somewhat drunk. He kept saying that he wanted to join us. We kept trying to put him off. But he insisted and followed us. We were on foot and on our way back we were ambushed by the army. The rest of us ran away and managed to escape. But he was caught. He was tortured and then killed. The pieces of his body were strewn around the area for people to see. His head was in one place and his limbs in another.

Nalanda tells this story centred on ‘youthfulness’ to get across a number of salient points. He uses it to stress various negative characteristics that are part and parcel of *tarunakama*, such as the inability to assess the consequences of one’s actions, impulsiveness, naivety, and an attraction to weapons and power. He distinguishes between different categories of insurgent youth through the use of this idiom. A clear differentiation is made between the youthful protagonist of his story on the one hand (i.e., insurgents driven by the negative qualities of *tarunakama*), and ‘authentic’ insurgents like himself on the other hand, who he portrays in moral terms and represents as astute young insurgents selflessly committed to the ‘righteous’ revolutionary cause. After all they were able to avoid being captured and made

¹⁷ Forcibly entering homes and seizing people’s national identity cards, often at gunpoint, was common practice on the part of the JVP during its insurgency. Many research participants told me that this enabled JVP cadres in hiding to assume different identities to avoid detection by the state. Some ex-insurgents also said that this tactic was used to sabotage the stop-and-search operations of the state security forces, in that if the majority of civilians did not have identity cards it would be difficult for security officers who stopped them on the streets to identify them, thereby creating confusion and blurring the lines between JVP cadres and non-combatant civilians.

attempts to dissuade this inebriated young man from joining the revolutionaries for all the wrong reasons.

This image of the ‘undesirable insurgent’ appears to affirm the generic stereotype of the JVP insurgent at a popular level. Nalanda blames the failure of the insurrection and the loss of popularity of the JVP on those ‘undesirable’ youth (symbolised by the protagonist of his story), rather than on the violent actions of the JVP itself. This appears to be an attempt on Nalanda’s part to protect both his own and the JVP’s political image. Deflection of blame for violence has been shown to be a characteristic feature in the narratives of ‘perpetrators’ of violence, and we shall see more of it in the stories that follow (see Payne 2008, Foster et al. 2005). Furthermore, through the graphic illustration of the brutal violence inflicted on the young boy who joined the insurgents on a youthful whim, Nalanda offers a veiled critique of state counter-insurrectionary violence perpetrated often against those who were innocent of any wrongdoing. This is largely in keeping with the master narrative of the JVP, which draws attention to violence perpetrated by the state, but remains silent, or denies outright, that perpetrated by its own cadres during the Terror.

Kanchana’s story below, gives us further insight into how people use the idiom of ‘youth’ to reconstruct their own experiences of the Terror. Kanchana is a former insurgent in his mid-30s, who works as a sports instructor. Having spent several years in hiding as a young insurgent, he successfully managed to evade capture by the security forces, and ultimately left the JVP due to disagreements over its policies.

Kanchana, unlike many other former insurgents interviewed for this research, firmly invests his youthful years with agency and explains his decision to participate in the insurrection as being based on rational choice. His narrative provides an interesting glimpse into the political context that prevailed at the time, around which the JVP mobilised youth for its attempted revolution:

I was a youth then but no one from the JVP came to mobilise me. I went out and joined them... I joined the insurrection because of the anti-democratic political regime of the UNP. They broke the rule of law, abused human rights, and stifled the media. J.R. (President Jayawardene) was like a dictator. He singularly took decisions (*tanimatayen*) and carried them out. Workers who went on strike were simply sacked. They were anti-democracy. I wanted to change the system. I felt very strongly that we needed democracy. We needed to protect the rule of law,

and human rights. I knew that we wouldn't achieve this through Socialism as the JVP preached. But they were the best alternative available. They were the only ones who stood up against the Government. So I joined because of anti-UNP reasons.

Kanchana articulates clear and well-thought out reasons for his decision to take up arms to topple the state. He accepts responsibility for this decision, which he roots in specific political grievances. Kanchana's narrative diverges from the explanations of many other insurgents (such as Kavindu whose story featured earlier) who instead blamed their youthful vulnerability and its exploitation by the JVP for their involvement in the insurgency. Kanchana presents a morally justifiable reason for his decision to join the insurrection, which was to overthrow a violent regime and establish democracy in its place. Kanchana's youth isn't one of naivety and idealistic faith in the JVP's agenda. He simply states that he believed the JVP to be the only viable alternative available at the time. Kanchana does not represent his youthful years as having been blinded by the burden of *tarunakama*, which makes one particularly vulnerable to violence. He is keen to show that he sought out the JVP rather than being one of its hapless targets, and proceeds to engage in a moral critique of the violence perpetrated by both the state and the JVP:

People joined the insurrection with various agendas (*vivida balavēga*). Intelligent leaders would have co-ordinated these different motivations and led them towards one goal. But the JVP leaders couldn't. The JVP was about youth and youth is about strength and emotionality (*āvēgashīli*). You can't solve problems through these two things... Youth are attracted to weapons. In addition, if they couldn't work with weapons by joining the army, then this provided an alternative for them to carry out their desires. Many young people came with the *rālla* (herd). I realised that the JVPs actions did not develop democracy. That the problems of a corrupt and anti-democratic regime could not be solved through further acts that were anti-democratic. The JVP also killed a lot of people. Then the intelligent people (insurgents) started criticising it (the JVP) and moving away from the party.

It should be noted here that his admission that the JVP itself committed murder was significant, given that the majority of former insurgents either avoided, or denied

outright, the perpetration of violence by the JVP.¹⁸ This was largely down to fear of personal and political repercussions, and particularly in the case of those who continued to support the JVP, concern to avoid tarnishing its political image. Interestingly, both the UNP regime and JVP deny responsibility for instigating the violence of the *Bheeshanaya*, instead blaming the other for aggressive violence against which one was forced to defend themselves.

According to Kanchana, the incompetence of JVP's own youthful leadership and its inability to exercise control over the 'herd' of 'undesirable' youth that flocked to its ranks ultimately led to the failure of its attempted revolution. The *rālla* here is represented as lacking intelligence and joining the JVP in their droves for all the wrong reasons (i.e., for personal gain, such as, access to weapons and power). On the other hand, 'intelligent' and 'righteous' insurgents like himself, Kanchana implies, were driven by selfless goals based on ethical conviction. In other words, the 'undesirable' youth joined the insurrection for immoral self-fulfilling purposes, ultimately engaging in unjustifiable acts of violence, while the moral insurgents (like himself) were willing to sacrifice their lives for the righteous goals of bringing about social and political justice. This demonstrates the importance he attaches to the intentions that underpinned people's involvement in insurrectionary violence. The former, he blames for the spiralling escalation of violence and the ultimate downfall of the JVP. The latter (including himself), he remembers as having raised moral objections to the violent and unethical direction that the JVP veered off to, ultimately disassociating themselves from the JVP and its insurgency altogether. Through his use of the idiom of 'youth', Kanchana refashions himself as having been a 'moral' and 'righteous' insurgent, and puts distance between himself and the 'immoral' *rālla*, who he blames for the violence of the insurrection. In remembering his own actions in moral terms, he finds a way of continuing to live with himself and his past, post-terror.

This representation of the self in moral terms is further elaborated in Ajan's story below. Ajan is a 38 year old ex-insurgent who had left the JVP soon after his release from state detention. He told me:

¹⁸ As time went on however, some former insurgents admitted to 'minor' acts of violence committed by the JVP such as threatening people to adhere to *hartals* (unofficial strikes and curfews). Denial was largely on the part of those who continued to support the JVP and were concerned about damaging the political image of the party and its revolution.

The problem was that you had very educated people who wanted to change society. But when the *rälla* started joining, they (the JVP leadership) lost control of them. The *rälla* had nothing else to do and didn't really believe in their ideas (JVP revolutionary ideology). I got involved because I really believed in what they (the JVP) were doing. But after a while all the bad people – thugs, criminals and uneducated people all started joining. It was a problem of mismanagement. The whole thing was mismanaged. The leaders couldn't control these people... Many young people... joined because they had nothing else to do. Many did it to be the thugs... to show off their power. Everyone went with the *rälla*. And many people who had broken hearts (whose love lives had failed) joined. But that was the problem. You then had these people who wanted to take revenge and settle personal scores.

Ajan, like Kanchana and Nalanda above, differentiates between the 'honourable' revolutionaries and the herd of uneducated 'undesirables'. He points the finger of blame for violence at the latter. This violence was abhorrent because it was indiscriminate and perpetrated for self-gratification (e.g., to show off their power, for reasons of 'thuggery', to exact revenge and settle personal scores). Ajan here is implicitly engaging in a moral critique of violence, which implies some forms of violence (i.e., that carried out for personal benefit) to be less morally justifiable than others (i.e., that carried out for selfless reasons in order to benefit wider society). Ajan carefully situates himself in that category of 'righteous' and 'moral' insurgents who were 'educated' and participated in the insurrection out of a selfless commitment to its honourable goals. Through his narrative, Ajan not only engages in a moral critique of violence, but also clearly allocates responsibility for violence to a section of the JVP from which he conspicuously distances himself.

Let us now consider Tissa's story. Tissa is a small but somewhat formidable man in his early 40s. A former regional insurgent leader, he continues to be politically active in the JVP.

When the Bheeshanaya became harsh (*darunu*), party workers started being identified (by the counter-insurrectionary officers). So we had to get new people in to try and make sure the leaders' identities became dissolved into the background. This was our biggest weakness. That's when the insurrection fell. In the early days the JVP had educated youth. If we had stayed with them the insurrection would have been a success. When support fell and people started getting caught, then the new people began to get more responsibility. These new youth came with the *rälla*. They were

uneducated, some couldn't even write properly, they just wanted to fight and to own a gun. Like you get some boys joining the army just use a gun. The JVP then couldn't control these people. This was our failure. But we had to get in new people to protect the main activists and leaders like Rohana Wijeweera. Many of the ones who came with the *rālla* also died.

The idea of 'youthfulness' is used by Tissa to explain, or rather justify, violence on the part of the JVP, and to rationalise the overall failure of its insurrection. He deflects responsibility for both on to that 'undesirable' and 'uneducated' youth cohort, which was blighted by the negative traits of *tarunakama*. Tissa further places those key activists and leaders of the JVP (like himself) out-with this youthful 'herd' and instead aligns them with the 'morally righteous' group of youth selflessly committed to the honourable revolutionary cause. In averting culpability for violence in this manner, he attempts to protect the image of the JVP (and himself), admitting instead to the lesser charge of being unable to control the problem of youthfulness within the ranks of the JVP.

However, he attempts to water down even this, by drawing parallels between the JVP and the security forces, stating that the army too suffers from problems of *tarunakama*, with young recruits often being attracted to the access to weapons it offers them. Here he hints at both organisations being on a level footing when it comes to violence. This "language of error" (Payne 2008: 21) that Tissa as a former JVP insurgent leader adopts to explain the violence of the insurrection, is reflected in Payne's work on perpetrators of violence, as just one form of denying responsibility for violence. Payne shows how in public confessions, perpetrators of state sponsored violence draw on human and organisational fallibility to suggest that those in positions of leadership were unaware of, or unable to control, the violence perpetrated by a few "rotten apples" belonging to the lower ranks of the security forces. She goes on to argue that at the most, this amounts to admitting acts of omission, rather than confessing to acts of committing violence (Payne 2008: 21-22).

Remembering Past Violence and the Self in Moral Terms

In remembering their own involvement in the insurrection as being shaped by ethical conviction, former insurgents attempted to find ways of reworking their past

experiences to continue living with themselves and with others in the aftermath of terror. This was particularly significant in a post-terror environment that lacks reconciliation. Taylor has argued that “selfhood and the good, or ...selfhood and morality ... (are) inextricably intertwined” (1989: 3). In the face of a discomforting past entailing complicity in violence that is widely judged to be morally unjustifiable, rooting one’s memory of the self in the good is an important coping mechanism. It enables the continuation of life and sociality after violence, and helps people reform their sense of selfhood, which had been thrown into question by violence. Through a reworking of memory, these former insurgents then create a morally acceptable role for themselves in a reconstructed past, and thereby recreate their experiences of violence. In refashioning their self identity and their relationship to the past in terms of the moral, they are able to continue living with memories of violence in the aftermath.

‘Witnesses’ Remember the Violence of *tarunakama*

It was not just former insurgents who explained the violence of the *Bheeshanaya* in terms of ‘youthfulness’. Many of those who ‘witnessed’ the apparent chaos of the Terror and the brutality of its violence, also framed their interpretations of it in terms of *tarunakama*. This provided a means through which people could understand and rationalise a past that appeared morally incomprehensible. It further enabled people to carry on living with those former ‘youthful’ insurgents responsible for perpetrating violence in their communities.

Ralahami is a man in his 70s, who runs a small shop in a remote village in the central region of Sri Lanka. He maintains a keen interest in politics and current affairs, and has always been a supporter of the UNP. Ralahami was in his mid-50s when he observed the events that unfolded in his village during the Terror. He explained them to me as follows.

The JVP boys didn’t do what they did with any proper understanding. The talented orators (*daksa katakayō*) (the JVP leadership) pulled the minds of our boys (*apē kollo*). The problem was their age. They were at a bad age. So all the school boys went and did JVP. They didn’t know JVP theory or about the danger involved in those things... The army generally got the right ones. Now I remember at that age we didn’t have the awareness (*avabōdaya*) we have now. We thought that we were the big guys. At school if a younger boy was cheeky

or if a boy in a class below ours went after a girl our age, we would beat them up. So the clever JVP orators pulled them in. They altered their minds. And then when those boys went home with those new revolutionary ideas, and their parents scolded them, they even turned against their own parents. That's how much their minds were changed. Children should love their parents. But in our village there was an incident where a young JVP boy even killed his own parents because they disagreed with his ideas. Those who took part in 1971 (the first JVP uprising) were more educated. They had more of an understanding of what they were doing. In the 1980s they didn't have any understanding – they just went along with it because they were young.

Ralahami depicts the “liminal category” (West 2000: 180) of youth to be a dangerous period in one's life, with increased risk of vulnerability to the malevolent external influences of violence. He divests young people entirely of agency and represents them as being devoid of the capacity to think for themselves, going so far as to suggest that young insurgents were brainwashed by the “talented orators” of the JVP.

For many people like Ralahami, the violence of the *Bheeshanaya* was particularly contemptible because it was perpetrated between ‘intimates’ - people who shared the same social and religious background, often involving neighbours and even friends. That “our boys” (the familiar and the ‘intimate’) could ‘turn on us’ was indeed perplexing and difficult to comprehend. His narrative suggests the normative values around which ‘intimate’ Sinhala communities were structured, to have been turned upside down by the violence of the *Bheeshanaya*. Ralahami expresses this sentiment through the story of the young insurgent who kills his parents – a crime universally reprehensible, but felt particularly so in a culture that places great value on almost unquestioning respect and deference towards parents and elders. For Ralahami then, ‘youthfulness’ provided a way of making sense of, and coming to terms with, past violence. In stating that “the army usually got the right ones” Ralahami expresses his tacit support for the counter-insurrection, apparently considering it necessary to protect the values that held Sinhala Buddhist communities together and to restore order. Through the use of kinship metaphors such as “our boys”, he attempts to recreate a sense of ‘cultural intimacy’ (Herzfeld 1997) in the aftermath of a violence that destroyed ‘intimate’ communities and the moral values that underpinned them.

Interestingly, in a similar but different vein to the narratives of former insurgents who differentiated between ‘morally righteous’ and ‘undesirable’ groups of youth within the 1980s insurgent cohort, Ralahami too distinguishes between two types of insurgents. But here he classifies into two separate camps the insurgents of

the 1971 uprising and those of the second insurrection. He states: “those who engaged in 1971 were more educated. They had more of an understanding of what they were doing. In the 1980s ... they just went along with it because they were young”. This comment is ironic given that the 1971 uprising was in itself made up of youth, arguably more so than the second insurrection. However, it shows a clear attempt by Ralahami to account for the comparative excess of violence (and its particularly disturbing nature), perpetrated by the JVP during its second insurgency.

On this point of differentiation between the youthful insurgents of the 1971 JVP uprising and those of the second insurrection, let’s now turn to an extract of a conversation I had with Shajiv. Shajiv was a JVP insurgent in its 1971 uprising, with specific responsibility for procuring weapons to implement the infamous co-ordinated attack against police stations across Sri Lanka. Following his release from detention Shajiv left the JVP but has since keenly observed its developments. He had no involvement in the second insurrection. In fact, Shajiv was forced to flee into hiding after becoming a target of the JVP’s pogrom against ‘traitors’ during the Terror, which involved the persecution of many former insurgents of the 1971 era. Shajiv told me:

We were very young then in 1971. We were dreaming of socialism and thought of achieving equality and justice through Marxism through an armed struggle. We had a special plan to achieve power by gathering arms and attacking police stations [laughs quietly]...In 1971 most of the youth were educated. The 1980s was different. There was a strong student component but also a lot of people from the underworld. Even the student wing of the 1980s was violent. It was really brutal [starts showing signs of distress]. I really can’t understand the violence of the 1980s [long pause]. I have tried to study it. But I can’t understand the things I saw. They wanted to bring fear to everyone and to dominate society. And for that they acted in a special way. They didn’t just kill. They killed anyone and everyone - in a brutal manner. It came from the bottom. Not from the top.

Shajiv explains his own involvement in the 1971 uprising in terms of his youthful idealism, thereby affirming the youthful nature of that event. He clearly marks off the 1971 insurgents with whom he was aligned, portraying them as being ‘educated’ and having honourable goals, from the youth who participated in the second insurgency,

who he construes as being predisposed to violence (he mentions involvement of the criminal underworld and the violent nature of the 1980s JVP student wing).

He considers the violence of the second insurgency to be unacceptable because it was particularly brutal, random, and excessive, targeting ‘ordinary’ civilians and driven by people’s self-serving greed for power. In emphasising its permeation at the grassroots, Shajiv suggests that the violence of the 1980s was not appropriately directed or controlled by the leadership. Through this, Shajiv intimates the violence of 1971 to have been more morally justifiable, given its specific targeting of the state; its adherence to a specific revolutionary strategy (“special plan”); its control by the leadership; and its implementation by ‘educated’ young people with honourable goals of justice and equality.

Drawing such comparisons between the two uprisings and apportioning blame for violence to the particular type of ‘youthfulness’ that the 1980s insurgency entailed, allows both Ralahami and Shajiv to comprehend and come to terms with the violence of the *Bheeshanaya*. In the absence of reconciliation and reparation, the narrative idiom of ‘youth’ allows them to put some distance between the violence of the *Bheeshanaya* and their neighbours who were responsible for it. It further suggests the desire for a new beginning post-terror (i.e., the adults who they must live alongside now are not the same people they were in their youth), and provides a means of re-imagining an ‘intimate’ community torn apart by violence.

Let us now consider the perspective of yet another (albeit distant) ‘observer’ of the *Bheeshanaya*, from a background that is significantly different to that of the former insurgents featured in this chapter so far, as well as that of Shajiv and Ralahami. Rikesh is a 39 year old lawyer who works for a multinational corporation. He is a product of English education, of Christian background, and belongs to the Colombo elite. Despite being a ‘youth’ during the Terror, his experiences of the *Bheeshanaya* differed greatly from his youthful *swabhāsha* educated peers from rural and semi-urban backgrounds. Rikesh continues to live in central Colombo, which was largely sheltered from the violence of the *Bheeshanaya*, except for curfews issued by both the JVP and the state, which interrupted people’s daily routines of school and work.¹⁹ Our interview was carried out in English as Rikesh did not feel comfortable articulating himself in Sinhala. An extract of our conversation is as follows.

¹⁹ Studies on elite perspectives of the *Bheeshanaya* are lacking. Some brief references are made by Perera to the middle and upper-classes living in a state of denial and constructing “an alternate reality within the air-conditioned and refrigerated existence of suburbia” (Perera 2001: 166). See Perera 2001, 1999.

We were also badly affected by what they (JVP insurgents) did. I was in school then and remember the ‘jerfews’ – we called it that because they were curfews set by the JVP [laughs]. We enjoyed them because it meant schools were closed and you got to stay at home. They brought chaos, attacking public infrastructure. They were simply hooligans. Just misguided youth. They weren’t that educated – may be some were semi-educated. They were just young idealistic Marxists. They may have said they had all sorts of grievances. But we all have grievances. Even the middle-classes have certain grievances. But you can’t just cause chaos and threaten a democracy. This country has been a democracy for so long. And they came and tried to mess it up. ... (they) threatened our economy... The problem here is that Sinhala people are very lazy... because of the weather and because of Buddhism. People have had it too easy. They have never had to work for anything. All these people are traditionally farmers. Farming is easy here because of the weather. You just throw a seed and it will grow. So farmers have enough to fill their bellies and just wait. I ask a Sinhala person to work overtime and he won’t. As long as he has enough to fill his belly he is happy to just wait. It’s that Buddhist belief in *karma* and that lotus-eating passivity that has made them a lazy lot. They have no interest in accumulating wealth...that J.R. (President Jayawardene) was useless. He just sat there. He thought he was some kind of god – with his *dharmista* society.²⁰ Premadasa came in and wiped them (the JVP) out. That’s what he had to do...When there is such a threat to democracy you need to take strong measures. Most of the people who were rounded up were involved in some way.

Rikesh uses the idiom of ‘youth’ to facilitate his understanding of the *Bheeshanaya* and in particular its motivations. Rikesh buys wholeheartedly into the state narrative of the Terror and its portrayal of JVP insurgents, and his parrot-like use of its vocabulary (e.g., “misguided youth”, “idealistic Marxists”) is unnerving. Rikesh construes the insurgency to have been a threat to democracy and the counter-insurrection a necessity to protect it. He denigrates his youthful counterparts as “hooligans”, refusing to acknowledge that they may have had valid socio-economic and political grievances.

Rikesh’s narrative is interesting because it points to the yawning chasm between the perspectives and lifestyles of the English-educated elites and that of their socially disadvantaged *swabhāsha* educated peers of rural and semi-urban

²⁰ *Dharmista* translates as ‘one who follows the *dharma* (Buddha’s teachings)’. President J.R Jayawardene publicly stated his intention to create a *dharmista* society during his tenure, which denotes a society governed by the teachings of the Buddha.

backgrounds. This is well illustrated in Rikesh's fantastical imaginings of the easy and carefree lives that the rural poor (here generically described as 'farmers') apparently lead. He appears unaware of the real experiences of poverty and social discrimination that mark the lives of the majority of Sri Lankans. Through his 'theory' of laziness that he applies to Sinhala Buddhist people belonging to the lower stratum of society, Rikesh insinuates that those young people who participated in the insurgency did so in pursuit of easy access to power (i.e., they were too lazy to work themselves up the social and economic ladder).

While for those living out-with the confines of privileged society in central Colombo, memories of the *Bheeshanaya* predominantly involve trauma and terror, Rikesh remembers the Terror for having offered some light entertainment. He even mentions deriving "enjoyment" from it. Rikesh does not face the challenge of having to learn to live with former insurgents after violence, since those with whom he shares his social world were not involved in the JVP. Nevertheless, Rikesh's narrative work framed in terms of youth, like that of Ralahami and Shajiv, is also demonstrably an attempt to understand the violence of the *Bheeshanaya*. However, instead of grappling with the problems of 'our own boys turning on us' – an identification he cannot make due to the class difference that separates him from his less privileged youthful counterparts, he attempts instead to comprehend the violent actions of 'the other' and 'the unfamiliar' by way of biological theories and explanations of misguided youthfulness.

Stories of Surviving the Terror Framed in Youth

In this section we will look at some other stories that people told about their negotiation of the Terror through their use of 'youth' as a narrative device. These mainly took the form of survival stories in which former insurgents positioned themselves squarely as 'victims' of violence. These narratives of former insurgents were laden with emotion and emphasise the suffering endured through terror. Their stories communicated certain everyday moral values, such as kinship and community ties, and the obligations of communities to protect their young people. Through their narratives, former insurgents re-imagined community relationships and attempted to re-establish the normative moral values that underpinned them.

These painful and bitter narratives were classified as ‘youthful’ experiences, and showed violence as disrupting or suspending one’s youthful life. Normal everyday activities, such as going to school, bathing in the river, and interacting with friends, are shown to take on a potentially life-threatening turn during the Terror – a period during which youth as a social group could not ‘be seen’ in, or tolerated by, society. The perception of ‘youth’ as a malevolent force and the disqualification of young people from society is a theme that runs through the narratives of former insurgents. In these stories, ‘youth’ emerge as mature, rational, strategic, and responsible, but also as vulnerable, persecuted, and in need of protection.

The context in which these stories are set is one of heightened terror, debilitating fear, and apparent chaos, as the counter-insurrection gathered momentum in 1989. Unknown armed gangs stalked villages and towns, abducting and murdering young people. Opportunists exploited this climate to settle personal scores and denounce their neighbours, putting community ties under immense pressure. In some areas, entire populations of young people from villages and towns were forced to flee into hiding for months or even years. I heard many stories of young people battling inhospitable and dangerous environments (e.g., going out to sea stowed away in fishing boats, hiding in jungles) in their struggle to survive the counter-insurrection. What comes out of these survival stories is the ingenious and creative capacity of young people to evade death and their ability to take responsibility for their own survival under the most trying circumstances. Let us now consider Tissa’s story of negotiating the Terror.

I was due to sit my A’ Level exam in August 1989. In April I left school because the situation at home got to a stage where I couldn’t stay there anymore. The army was after me... I travelled throughout the country ... Throughout my travels I had to do my utmost to hide my identity and constantly change it...A JVP Buddhist monk from this area put me in touch with another monk. I then travelled all over the country with him for several years as his assistant, reciting *pirit*²¹ and participating in rituals... He didn’t know that I was a JVPer. I had to be very careful about not divulging my true identity to anyone. If I had been caught I wouldn’t be sitting here today talking to you. In 1989 I felt fear, that I was alone and responsible for my own safety. Once from Anuradhapura to Mathugama, a journey which requires one direct bus, I took 8 buses to avoid being caught. That was some journey! If a person looked at me in an odd manner I’d get off and get another bus. My sole aim was to stay alive...I

²¹ *Pirit* is the chanting of Buddhist protective verses or Buddhist protective ritual.

had to use various strategies (*upakramashīli*) to protect my life... When people talked about politics or the JVP I pretended to be very innocent and not to know anything about politics... I broke contact with the JVP... I even went into army camps to visit people who were caught and no one guessed who I was. I always had to be alert. It was a time of fear and intense loneliness.

Tissa went on to elaborate on two specific incidents where he managed to ‘cheat death’ by narrowly escaping members of the counter-insurrectionary forces who had tracked him down. He put this down to his constant state of alertness and the ability to think quickly on his feet. Tissa positions himself as the victim in this story of survival. Fear and a sense of isolation are the predominant feelings that he remembers from his experience of the Terror. The youthful Tissa represented in the narrative is far removed from traits of impulsiveness, gullibility, irresponsibility, and naivety that tend to afflict youth, as ex-insurgents such as him told us earlier. Instead, the young insurgent represented here is portrayed as mature and capable of managing great responsibility, with the ability to carefully consider strategies to ensure his survival.

Kuda is a man in his early 30s, who works in a restaurant. He comes from an economically impoverished background and joined the JVP at the age of 12. He was primarily involved in putting up posters and delivering *tunḍu* (notes issuing JVP demands). Kuda continues to vote for the JVP but admitted to me that he was becoming increasingly disillusioned with its leadership. His recollections of the *Bheeshanaya* were overwhelmingly painful, dominated by the experiences he endured while in hiding.

The *Bheeshanaya* was a time when people couldn’t step out onto the road. Young boys couldn’t stay in their houses. Our families lived in constant fear of us being kidnapped. I hid in the jungles every night for about a year. All the boys in the village ... were targets for abduction. I live in a small village in X. We would wash our face in the morning, and during the afternoon we would go to the river to bathe and play. It was a very liberating way of life. But when the *Bheeshanaya* came, all freedom vanished. We degenerated into a situation where we were not even able to eat.

We hid in the jungle in groups. There were about 15 of us girls and boys and we looked out for each other. We didn’t have food. My mother really suffered at the time. *Budu Ammō!*²² How she suffered! Making *pol-roti* (coconut-bread)

²² *Budu Ammo* translates as “my Buddha/enlightened mother!”, but is equivalent to the English exclamation “My God!”.

and running back and forth trying desperately to sneak it in to us in the jungle at the dead of night. There was no division between morning and night – we didn't 'get up in the morning'. People who loved us, and the village people, were constantly awake and alert. They'd always watch the road to see if an unusual vehicle or person passed. The village people were really committed (*kāpavīma*) to protect the village boys. They would cook a bit of extra jak because they knew that at some point in the night some boys from the village in hiding may come in search of food.

Through his narrative Kuda demonstrates what it meant to belong to the category of 'youth' at the height of the Terror. This was a period in which being a youth was dangerous business, as it carried connotations of danger and subversion. The menace of 'youth' could not be seen or tolerated in society. Kuda goes on to describe, with an air of nostalgia, the carefree life of youthfulness before its rude disruption by the Terror, which thrust upon him grave adult responsibilities. The *Bheeshanaya* is described in a sense as having temporally suspended his youthful life. He talks of life before the Terror being marked by routines following daily temporal rhythms. But during the *Bheeshanaya* night and day blurs into one. The suffering endured is conveyed in collective terms – it is the collective suffering of the young people in his village and of his family and community. Through his story he invokes values of community and kinship, and the moral obligations that fall on these groups to support one another in times of extreme violence.

Denial of Moral Responsibility for Violence and Avoidance

In choosing to remember being the 'victims' of violence, and in selecting stories to tell centred on their suffering and persecution, as opposed to positioning themselves as 'perpetrators' of violence in their narratives and remembering their own persecution of others, former insurgents here engage in a form of avoidance and indirect denial of moral responsibility for violence. The few available studies on 'perpetrators' of violence in other contexts have also shown denial, avoidance, and justification to be common features of their narratives of violence (see Payne 2008, Cohen 2001, Foster et al. 2005). Nevertheless, at the same time former insurgents do not seem to be engaging in a clear-cut denial of violence. They appear instead to be drawing on narrative strategies of distancing, deflection, avoidance, and

disassociation, to reject responsibility for certain forms of ‘immoral’ violence, while at the same time implicitly acknowledging their involvement in insurrectionary activity for morally righteous purposes.

Remembering one’s complicity in violence here has significant consequences for life in aftermath, in a post-terror context of silence, fear, and forgetting. Moreover, when the overall moral judgement on the violence perpetrated during the *Bheeshanaya* is negative, acknowledging responsibility for violence potentially poses challenges to the moral foundation of one’s life and sociality with others after terror. However, we may also ask if it is valid to expect former insurgents to acknowledge moral responsibility for violence when they believe themselves to be innocent of any wrongful action, and when they further believe their present self to be different to that of their youthful self that engaged in insurrectionary violence some twenty years ago.

During my time in the field, a common statement I came across from people who were not involved in the JVP, was that “the best” and “most educated” youth had died, and that it was the “undesirables” who had ultimately survived. This is typified in the comment by Siripala, an old shopkeeper. Having arrived in Sri Lanka some months earlier to carry out my fieldwork, I was becoming increasingly despondent over the time it was taking me to identify former JVP insurgents. He responded to my laments with, “A generation of our best and most educated youth was killed in the *Bheeshanaya*. The useless ones were left to survive. Why would you want to speak to them?” I met with variations of this statement from people whom I cautiously talked to about the *Bheeshanaya*. Similarly, in 1991 when Spencer revisited the Sinhala village in which he had carried out his fieldwork seven years earlier, he was told that “the cleverest” and “best educated” young people had been disappeared, because they “posed the greatest long term threat to the powers-that-be” (2000: 132).

Siripala’s words niggled in my ears like the hum of an irritating mosquito, as I travelled through villages and towns speaking to former insurgents about their memories of the Terror. If every one of these former insurgents I was speaking to (according to them) fell within the category of the ‘moral’ insurgent, where then were all those ‘immoral undesirables’ who were apparently responsible for the most horrific acts of violence perpetrated in the name of the insurgency? Moreover, given that many people who were not themselves involved in the insurgency insisted that the only ones to survive the *Bheeshanaya* were in fact those very ‘undesirables’ who were responsible for much of the violence, it just did not seem to make sense that all those former insurgents I spoke to drew an emphatic distinction between the type of

‘good’ insurgents they were and those elusive ‘immoral insurgents’. This denial of moral responsibility through a refashioning of the self is a tension that runs through this thesis. Eliciting confessions is not the aim of this research. Instead, my interest here lies in the ways in which people remember and talk about their violent pasts in the aftermath of terror. As Swedenberg argues, with regard to the narratives of former Palestinian rebels who participated in the anti-colonial insurgency from 1936-9, the value of such stories is to be found in the motives for telling them, rather than in their “truth status” (1995: 148).

Through their use of ‘youth’ as a narrative strategy, former insurgents engaged in a form of retrospective ‘white-washing’ of their past, which allowed them to continue living with themselves, their pasts, and with others after violence. In the context of surviving the Holocaust, Levi poignantly states, “the ‘saved’ of the Lager were not the best... preferably, the worst survived ...I felt innocent, yes, but enrolled among the saved and therefore in permanent search of a justification in my own eyes and those of others. The worst survived ... the best all died (1988: 62 - 63).

Perhaps for former insurgents then, remembering themselves in terms of the good and the moral is an effort necessary to continue justifying their right to survive, both to themselves and others. This is particularly important in the face of challenges posed by the stigma attached to the JVP insurgent. In using ‘youthfulness’ as a narrative frame to distance and disassociate themselves from their violent pasts, to deflect blame and avoid moral responsibility for violence, and to project a reworked representation of the self in terms of the ‘good’, former insurgents were justifying their own survival to themselves and others. This then is part of the memory work they engage in to recreate life and negotiate sociality after terror. In the next chapter we look at how people draw on yet another narrative strategy to mediate their memories of terror, and in particular to comment on the ways in which violence seeps into ‘intimate’ relationships.

Chapter 2

‘Opportunistic’ Violence and the Impossibility of ‘Intimacy’

When I remember that time I feel a big *Bheeshanaya* (terror) in my head. In those days we couldn’t stay as we are doing now. We couldn’t sit here and talk like this. You didn’t know when the gangs (*kalli*)... would come and abduct you. It was a time during which we didn’t have the mental stability to carry on with our education or economic activity. It was a lonely time... My brothers and I had to hide... It was especially dangerous to be by the main road. You didn’t know when you would get abducted. You didn’t know who would abduct you. You couldn’t trust (*visvāsa*) people. I saw shootings, bodies burning piled on tyres. It was a *vanacāri samājaya* (uncivilised and lawless society)

Kanchana, a former JVP insurgent, and I sat opposite each other on his small veranda one humid afternoon, surrounded by a thick foliage of banana trees that afforded us a comforting sense of privacy from the prying eyes of neighbours. A well-groomed young man, Kanchana’s face was etched with a distinctly troubled and somewhat distant expression, as he attempted to articulate his traumatic memories of Sri Lanka’s Terror. His words tumbled out in cascades, following no particular chronological or thematic order. Fear, uncertainty, isolation, vulnerability, mistrust, and human relationships stretched to breaking point, were his themes. For Kanchana, engaging in the very act of remembering past violence was an unsettling experience. He told me that doing so created “a big terror” in his head. This loaded statement intimates the legacy of trauma left by terror and the power of its memory to impress on the present.

Scholars have argued that memories of violence carry “additional burdens” of a moral and political nature (see Lambek and Antze 1996: xii, Kirmayer 1996). In this chapter I consider the ways in which people mediate and articulate memories of a particularly morally discomfiting nature. These were memories of a kind of violence that people specifically referred to as “*avastavādi*”. The Sinhala word *avastavādi* may be translated as ‘opportunistic’, and its use here suggested acts of violence that entailed the accrual of personal benefit at the expense of others. People described as *avastavādi*, violence that primarily took the form of revenge and denunciation perpetrated between ‘ordinary’ civilians who apparently knew each other, during the

Bheeshanaya.²³ Research participants overwhelmingly construed this violence as having been exacted by ‘opportunists’ who wrongfully exploited the climate of terror and chaos for personal gain. My research finds that memories of this type of violence were morally burdensome because of its perpetration between ‘intimates’, and the personal (rather than political) motives that underpinned it. This in turn rendered the mediation of its memory an ethical exercise, with implications for social life in the present. I argue that in their work of ethical remembering, people made attempts to distinguish between the personal and the political, and to allocate moral responsibility for violence, as part of the process of recreating sociality in the aftermath of terror. People used ‘opportunistic’ violence as an idiom through which to comment on the ways in which violence invades intimate social relationships.

The occurrence of revenge and denunciation at micro-level is a disturbing and little talked about feature of the *Bheeshanaya* that has received meagre attention in studies on the Terror. Despite being subjected to silence and a sense of taboo, ‘opportunistic’ violence nevertheless cropped up here and there in people’s narratives of the *Bheeshanaya* in an almost cursory but consistent fashion, indicating important meanings attached to it in people’s memories. Kanchana, the former insurgent whose story opened this chapter, alludes to its occurrence when he tellingly suggests society during the *Bheeshanaya* to be wild and uncivilised. He stresses the permeation of mistrust and uncertainty (e.g., not knowing who your abductors really were), and depicts a normative moral world turned upside down by terror, where people are rendered devoid of human qualities (i.e., people being reduced to behaving like uncivilised animals).

Moral repugnance expressed in stories of this particular form of violence that I came across during my time in the field, was directed at its perpetration between ‘intimates’ - people who shared the same ethnic, religious, and linguistic ‘community’, often involving neighbours, work-colleagues, and even friends. As Spencer noted on his return visit to the village in which he had carried out fieldwork prior to the Terror, the violence of this period pervaded “the capillary relations of everyday interaction: your political opponents would be neighbours usually, kin often, former friends sometimes” (Spencer 2000: 134). These memories were rendered morally irksome because they necessitated an acknowledgement of the willingness of ‘ordinary’ non-combatant civilians and ‘intimates’ at the grass-roots to play an active

²³ The term ‘ordinary’ here is used with caution and recognition of it being problematic. The violence of the *Bheeshanaya* took place at numerous levels, in various forms, and operated in many layers, leaving even ‘ordinary’ non-combatant civilians with ‘blood on their hands’.

role in sustaining a Terror generally considered as being imposed from ‘above’, in order to accrue personal advantages (see Fitzpatrick and Gellately 1997).

My research finds that in a retrospective post-terror context where ‘opportunistic’ violence was popularly deemed ‘wrong’ and ‘immoral’, remembering carried significant implications for sociality, and for notions of the self and accountability in the present. While the majority of people remembered revenge and denunciation as ubiquitous, everyone I spoke to vehemently denied outright, and took pains to distance themselves from, complicity in this particular form of violence. This differed somewhat from the concurrent acknowledgement and denial of moral accountability for political or insurrectionary violence that characterised the contradictory narratives found in the rest of this thesis. Insurrectionary or political violence (unlike revenge and denunciation) was generally construed as having been motivated by morally righteous goals, unlike the self-serving motivations assumed to underpin the perpetration of ‘opportunistic’ violence. The moral judgement passed on this type of violence in the aftermath, then lay in the distinction made between public and private motivation, and the extent to which it was perceived as being ‘intimate’, rather than political. Unlike other forms of violence, *avastavādi* violence seeped into the very foundations of everyday ‘intimate’ sociality in the present.

As we shall see in the course of this chapter, people’s narratives of ‘opportunistic’ violence constituted elaborate moral critiques of violence, and demonstrated attempts to grapple with an ethics to make sense of, and come to terms with, its occurrence, in the aftermath of the *Bheeshanaya*. People also drew on incidents of ‘opportunistic’ violence to talk about the climate of terror overall, mainly to highlight the strain that terror put on social relationships and to remember the ways in which these challenges were dealt with. I argue that remembering ‘opportunistic’ violence in ethical terms, enabled people to acknowledge the damage wrought on their communities by violence and to deal with issues of accountability. It allowed people to cautiously re-imagine a moral community in the aftermath of violence and to continue living with their violent past in the present (see Mueggler 2001).

Revenge and Denunciation in the *Bheeshanaya*: Some Background and Academic Reflections

The occurrence of ‘opportunistic’ violence during the *Bheeshanaya* is a ‘well-known secret’ within the Sinhala Buddhist community in southern Sri Lanka. It is commonly acknowledged at popular level that the *Bheeshanaya* witnessed the playing out of personal squabbles in the public political arena, as some people exploited the climate of terror to denounce neighbours and friends (in effect signing their death-warrants), and to carry out violent revenge attacks on personal ‘enemies’. Nevertheless, it is a rarely broached subject, with silence and denial overshadowing its memory. Existing literature on the *Bheeshanaya* alludes to the occurrence of revenge, personal score-settling, and denunciation at the height of the *Bheeshanaya* (see Gunaratna 1990, Perera 1999). In his work on female survivors of violence, Perera states that “there were also groups and individuals who used the prevailing situation to eliminate private enemies with the help of state or JVP hit-squads or merely under the pretext of such groups” (Perera 1999: 37). An Amnesty International report published in 1991 refers to ‘indications’ that people were being detained by the state on the basis of “lists drawn up by politicians or other influential people”, which included their personal foes (Amnesty International 1991: 4). However, the subject of revenge and denunciation between ‘intimates’ during the *Bheeshanaya* has not been systematically analysed, nor have specific accounts of such “indirect violence” (Kalyvas 2006) been recorded. The study of these issues is hindered to a great extent by a lack of evidence, largely due to the taboo that surrounds this form of violence. This problem is not unique to research on Sri Lanka. Kalyvas, who makes a case for understanding civil war through the study of local micro-level dynamics, has argued that violence involving non-combatants “has long remained off research limits because of its conceptual complexity and empirical opacity” (2006: 5-6).

Violent revenge and denunciation during the *Bheeshanaya* took place both at the macro-political level, between politicians, the security-forces, the JVP, paramilitary groups and vigilantes; and at micro-level at the grassroots involving apparently ‘ordinary’ civilians (often with no avowed allegiance to either the state or the JVP) and small-time politicians.²⁴ During my time in the field I was told of numerous incidents that involved people denouncing neighbours with whom they were locked in land disputes, work-colleagues with whom they had a personal grievance, ‘love rivals’ on the basis of jealousy, and even friends against whom they harboured petty grievances.

²⁴ See Gunaratna 1990, and also based on evidence gathered from conversations I had in the field.

The stories of ‘opportunistic’ violence that run through this chapter suggest that the climate of terror and the impunity, fear, suspicion, and confusion it fostered, offered people a unique opportunity to solve their personal problems, mainly by getting rid of opponents. People’s willingness to exploit this ‘opportunity’ led to a nourishment of the Terror from below (see Fitzpatrick and Gellately 1997), that had a spiralling effect on violence overall. As Borneman (2002) has argued, personal revenge perpetuates repetitive and rebounding violence, when it is carried out to settle scores.²⁵ My research finds that it also makes available to ‘ordinary’ people, convoluted and manifold routes for involvement in violence (directly or indirectly, and at various levels).

It was the willingness of ‘ordinary’ people on the ground to collaborate with terror through their betrayal of ‘intimates’ for personal gain that rendered the memory of revenge and denunciation so morally awkward. This in turn necessitated a moral critique of its occurrence and a denial of culpability for it, in people’s retrospective narratives. During my fieldwork I came across people who had not been involved in the JVP, but were nevertheless subjected to detention and torture on the basis of malicious denunciations based on envy and petty disputes. One retired senior counter-insurrectionary officer told me that the success of the counter-insurrection was significantly aided by ordinary people “coming forward with information” on (supposed) JVP insurgents in their communities. However, I was also told that there were many people who were genuinely frustrated with the impact of the JVP’s own violence and *hartāls* (unofficial strikes and curfews) on their everyday lives. It is possible that some of these people may have believed that they were engaging in a proactive effort to root out the ‘internal menace’ and protect the social fabric through their indirect collaboration in terror.

While many research participants represented revenge and denunciation as having been ubiquitous, it is important to note that such ‘indirect’ violence during the *Bheeshanaya* was sporadic, and that it did not follow any discernible pattern (although as we shall see later in this chapter, people came up with various explanations in an attempt to find a logical pattern to its occurrence). More importantly, we must not forget that there were many people who selflessly risked their own lives to protect their neighbours, friends, and loved ones from violence. The purpose of this chapter is not to question why people perpetrated ‘opportunistic’

²⁵ Borneman acknowledges borrowing the term ‘rebounding violence’ from Maurice Bloch (1992) to refer to repetitive and new cycles of violence.

violence, nor is it to find some logic to its occurrence, but rather to consider how people gave meaning to it and how they mediated its memory, along with its implications for life after terror. The narratives that feature in this chapter nevertheless do show the violence of the *Bheeshanaya* to be complex, murky and messy. Particularly when it came to discussions on ‘opportunistic’ violence, many people remembered the reality on the ground to involve numerous, confusing agents drawn from various levels of the conflict, and for a multiplicity of motivations, allegiances, and agendas to characterise the violence of this period.

Despite the tendency to view revenge as abnormal, irrational and even perverse, scholars have shown revenge to follow predictable patterns, to have rational goals, to comply with certain norms, and to discharge social functions (e.g., to regulate and diffuse violence within social groups) (see Gould 2000, Abu-Lughod 1986, Wallace 1995, Muir 1993). Wallace (1995) provides an insightful definition of ‘revenge’ that emerges from his comparison with ‘retribution’. Retribution, he argues, is something that can be pursued “disinterestedly”, often through the judicial system. Revenge on the other hand, is malicious in nature, entails passion, and carries with it “moral defects”, with the typical object of revenge being the disadvantage of the revengee (1995: 365-367). This explanation then construes revenge as being emotionally and ethically loaded. It is worth bearing in mind however, that people may have multiple and complex motives for acting, and that it is not possible to clearly compartmentalise all violent actions into neat categories of ‘retribution’ and ‘revenge’. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine that those pursuing retribution through the judicial system do so in a “disinterested” manner. Thereby, the acts of ‘revenge’ described in this chapter may also appear in some respects to fit into the category of retribution. Borneman (2002) in his article entitled ‘Reconciliation after Ethnic Cleansing’ differentiates between revenge and justice or legal redress. He describes revenge as “the arbitrary, narcissistic exercise of violence in which there is no accountability except to oneself and to a personal memory of the dead” (2002: 288).

Revenge and denunciation operated hand in hand during Sri Lanka’s *Bheeshanaya*, and denunciation was commonly used a means of exacting revenge, operating overall as an indirect form of intimate violence. The use of the *gōni billa* (the US inspired masked denouncer with a gunny-sack slung over her or his head) by the counter-insurrectionary forces, put intense pressure on community relationships at local level, and created a debilitating climate of mistrust and fear. People simply did not know who was behind the mask; whether it was an ‘intimate’ or personal enemy.

A simple nod of the *gōni billa*'s head in the direction of an individual would seal the latter's fate. As one man who had not been involved in the JVP but had been rounded up before a *gōni billa*'s public identification parade, put it, "If a fly landed on the *gōni billa*'s head and he shook his head to get it off, the person who happened to stand in the direction of that shake would be taken away and killed". The majority of my research participants told me that the *gōni billa* often nodded in the direction of his or her personal enemies regardless of whether or not they had been involved in insurgent activity. The *gōni billa* was used as a key tool of "psychological policing" (Gellately 1997: 220), whereby the state actively roused ordinary people to 'smoke-out the enemy within'. Through the *gōni billa* then, the state nurtured a culture of denunciation during the *Bheeshanaya*, manipulating fear and encouraging people to monitor the behaviour of their neighbours, which in turn put insurmountable stress on social relationships.

The *gōni billa* shows the difficulties of maintaining trust and intimate relationships amidst violence. It blurred the lines between the private or 'intimate' and the political. While terror undoubtedly led to a debilitating sense of fear and disempowerment for the majority of people, the dynamics surrounding the *gōni billa* illustrates people's active manipulation of the wider conflict to resolve petty disputes and air their personal grievances. This has been referred to as the "privatisation of politics" by Kalyvas, who points out that "while political actors 'use' civilians to collect information and win the war, it is also the case that civilians 'use' political actors to settle their own private conflicts" in effect using these political actors as private "contract killers" (2006: 14). Scholars have shown denunciation to have been a rife, 'everyday practice' in the context of 'terroristic' regimes, such as that of Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. Rather than being ideologically motivated, denunciations there were largely carried out to meet personal goals, showing overall the alarming readiness of ordinary people to actively collaborate in terror (see Fitzpatrick and Gellately 1997, Gellately 1997, Kozlov 1997, Gross 1982). Fitzpatrick and Gellately have argued that in the absence of opportunities to participate formally in democratic politics, denunciation was a means through which German citizens participated in the Nazi system – an avenue through which "they could express their opinions, articulate their interests and seek to satisfy them" (1997: 6). Similarly, the literature on European witch-hunting further illustrates the willingness of ordinary people to denounce as witches those with whom they had personal grievances, in their

eagerness to root out ‘the enemy within’, influenced by an atmosphere of fear, suspicion, and uncertainty (see Geschiere 2000, Roper 2004, Briggs 2006).

Silence and the Moral Judgement Passed on ‘Opportunistic’ Violence

The vast majority of research participants were hesitant to speak directly and openly about the occurrence of ‘opportunistic’ violence during the Terror, and the morally discomfiting nature of its memory shaped their narratives. Much effort and time had to be invested in developing trust between research participants and myself to elicit the stories of ‘opportunistic’ violence that fill the pages of this chapter. However, while acknowledgement of its occurrence was ultimately forthcoming, denial of complicity was a recurring narrative theme. Stories of revenge and denunciation were often recounted in the third person, as having taken place between other people, in other areas, and affecting other community relationships, thereby putting a distance between the teller and this form of violence. Some people however, readily told stories of being ‘victims’ of malicious denunciations and revenge attacks during the *Bheeshanaya*.

Many people expressed disgust at the exploitation of the climate of terror by ‘ordinary’ people and the perpetration of violence between neighbours and friends. On countless occasions I was privy to disparaging critiques of certain neighbours secretly accused of having personally benefited from exploiting the Terror, and who it was alleged continued to enjoy the fruits of their ill-gotten gains. One man in his early 50s, who had not been involved in either the JVP or the state security forces during the Terror, burst into tears as he told me that certain members of his kin continued to make his life difficult by falsely accusing him of having exploited the Terror for personal gain. He put this down to their jealousy of his success in building a house for his family.

The ‘intimate’ nature of this form of violence (and its sheer scale) further contributed to people’s silence. This was evident in the visible sense of shame and apparent incomprehensibility that often accompanied statements concerning those involved in it (e.g., “it was our *own* people killing each other”). People in general tend to find inflicting violence on neighbours bewildering because we tend to associate such ‘intimate’ relationships with “trust, cooperation, intimacy, and mutual helping” (Hewstone et al. 2008). However, studies from across the world have demonstrated

that violence often involves people who knew, or thought they knew each other (Das et al. 2000: 1), suggesting neighbourliness and its assumed 'intimacy' to be a poor inhibitor of violence.

Scholars have compellingly argued in recent years that violence is often rooted in micro-level dynamics and local cleavages, and predicated on everyday social and political relationships (see Das 1996, Spencer 2007, Jeganathan 1996, Kalyvas 2006). The 'opportunistic' violence that took place during Sri Lanka's Terror was also anchored in everyday politics and sociality at a local level, and people's narratives entailed an assumption that revenge and denunciation had transgressed the normative values expected to guide social relationships within the Sinhala Buddhist 'community'.

From Silence and Forgetting, to Remembering and Telling

Memories of revenge and denunciation were typically embedded in people's overall narratives of the *Bheeshanaya*. The following extract from a conversation between two men gradually raises the issue of 'opportunistic' violence in this manner. The men were friends from the same village. Hiran was from a rural elite family. His parents had been brutally murdered by the JVP and their dismembered bodies displayed in the town centre, because of their political allegiance to the governing UNP regime. Raja, on the other hand, was of working class background. He was primarily a witness to violence, with no particular political affiliations (although he later admitted to me that he was relieved when the JVP and its insurrection were crushed).

Raja: I was going to the shop on my bicycle just a short distance from my house. Two young boys put their hands out to stop me. They were so young I assumed that they just wanted a ride into town. I stopped and then they pointed their gun at me. They told me to give them my bicycle. So I said, "have you got permission from Kollu (the JVP village leader) for this?" (because they thought I was a friend of Kollu) they then left me and turned to another guy who was going past and took his bike off him and pedalled off. Then that man started hassling me demanding to know why they took his bike and not mine... Then we started fighting there on the street. So we went to the police-station. I went in and said that I wanted to file a complaint about the incident. The policeman tried to chase me away, saying that he didn't want to take down a statement. I

insisted that he did and he finally took it down but nothing happened. Ah! The problems we had in those days (*Appō! tibba karadara*).

Hiran: Do you remember my friend Jeevaka from the village? He was put in the *balu-van* (dog-pound van) and taken off to X camp (detention centre) where he was tortured for weeks. He didn't realise until much later that it was his friend from the village who had denounced him.

Raja: Yes. In those days crazy (*māra*) things happened, there is no point in even talking about it (*kiyala vāḍak nā*)... *Malli* (little brother) who was in the army came in his army clothes to visit me while on leave. The neighbours were all JVP boys. They saw *Malli* and jumped over their wall and ran off. I was terrified. I told *Malli* to please leave because they would now think that I was an army informant. Sure enough after he left... the boys from next door came in. They accused me of being an informant and pinned me against the wall. They said that they were going to kill me. Then Kollu (the JVP insurgent leader of the village) happened to walk past. I shouted out to him. He told the boys to let me go. He saved my life. He then told me "If someone bothers you just tell them that you know Kollu".

Memories of denunciation and revenge are woven into a wider story about the tribulations of negotiating everyday sociality during the *Bheeshanaya*. This story depicts human relationships being stretched to breaking point by terror as it illustrates two men, both 'victims' in this instance, 'turning on each other' over the bicycle incident. The conversation between Raja and Hiran further highlights overlapping features of terror such as suspicion and mistrust (e.g., Raja being suspected of being an informant); unpredictability (e.g., neighbours seemingly turning on each other); betrayal (e.g., friends maliciously denouncing each other); people being 'caught in the middle' of opposing factions (e.g., as demonstrated by Raja's tale of the impasse involving his soldier brother and his insurgent neighbours); impunity (e.g., the police refusing to follow-up complaints); and a sense of abnormality and chaos (e.g., men being taken off in dog-vans, children with guns).

Hiran's story about the man taken into detention as a result of a denunciation by a friend elicits a response from Raja that imbues the occurrence of such indirect violence between 'intimates' with a sense of madness and incomprehensibility. Raja comments, "In those days crazy things happened, there is no point in even talking about it", and follows on with an anecdote about his own experience of being a suspected informant. His statement expresses a sense of exasperation, and hints at the futility of articulating memories of events that appear morally incomprehensible in

hindsight. The challenge in expressing these memories most probably lies in the inadequacy of words and the limits of language, rather than in problems of memory (Kirmayer 1996: 174–5). Interestingly, denunciation is remembered and recounted here as having taken place between other people, thereby distancing the narrator from any implication in this form of violence. Similarly, Raja positions himself as a ‘victim’ in his story about the potential act of revenge he was subject to by his insurgent neighbours. He avoids mentioning whether or not his neighbours’ suspicions of him being an informant were valid.

Remembering Revenge and Denunciation

Anil, a taxi driver, who witnessed first-hand the violence and apparent havoc that the *Bheeshanaya* wreaked in his village, spoke of the occurrence of revenge and denunciation in the following terms.

The key factor in it all was personal revenge (*pudgalika paligānīm*). It may have started off as a social revolution about problems between the rich and the poor. But ... it ended in personal revenge. It really broke trust in the community. It came to be about private squabbles, like land disputes (*iḍam prashna*). Based on denunciations, people killed from various sides. It happened over such petty things, and you didn’t know who was doing it. I could be talking to someone in the afternoon in town, and perhaps I may have said some little thing that the other person took offence at, and in the evening I would be killed. Politicians were also at it, taking revenge on their political opponents. At that time people’s sense of justice/rationality (*sādāranakama giyā*) vanished. It was people in the village who were killing each other. People who knew each other! If it wasn’t crushed in 1989, the whole country would have been destroyed through that (revenge and denunciation).

Anil’s village in the central mountainous region was particularly notorious for violence, including denunciations and revenge attacks, during the *Bheeshanaya*. Anil’s apocalyptic description suggests that revenge and denunciation developed a dynamic of its own, blurring the lines between ‘perpetrators’ of (political) violence and ‘ordinary’ civilians and ‘intimates’. ‘Opportunistic’ violence here is shown as actively contributing to a spiralling of the Terror from below. Anil remembers the

devastating impact that this indirect form of violence had on social relationships, mainly in the sapping of trust, saturation of suspicion and fear based on uncertainty about the potential for unpredictable violent behaviour by neighbours.

Anil suggests that the Terror rendered people devoid of rationality and justice. He portrays a world in which normative values and order are turned upside down, and his own moral outrage is palpable in his stressing that this form of violence was exacted between ‘intimates’, “It was people in the village who were killing each other. People who knew each other!” This indicates an underlying assumption of ‘intimate’ relationships being bound and guided by certain normative values and obligations, and predicated on a modicum of trust. The moral reprehensibility of ‘opportunistic’ violence then is grounded in its perpetration between ‘intimates’ – people who supposedly knew each other, and the betrayal of trust. By willingly exploiting the Terror to engage in violence against others in their community for purposes of personal advantage, these ‘intimates’ then are viewed as having transgressed the normative moral values and obligations (e.g., collectivity, co-existence, mutual co-operation, and trust) that supposedly underpin Sinhala Buddhist communities. This form of violence goes against the very “moral resources” of ‘intimate’ relationships that one may expect to deter violence (Esses and Vernon 2008). Anil perceives this crime against morality to be so grave as to threaten the very survival of Sinhala society. The memory work that people engage in after terror then, entails an acknowledgement of the damage done by violence to their social relationships, which calls for a re-imagining of moral communities in the present, as we shall see in chapter 5 of this thesis.

Thiranyagama (N.d.) in her study of Tamils labelled as “traitors” by the LTTE argues that the abhorrence of “treason” is based on notions of intimacy. So the fear of a traitor is also a fear of being ‘intimate’ with others and the betrayal of one’s own self as a Tamil (as opposed to betrayal by an ‘outsider’). This, she goes on to argue, creates a situation of internal terror. I would also argue that, within the Sinhala Buddhist community, people’s ideas of ‘intimacy’ and its tacit understandings and values, were clearly linked to the moral reprehensibility of ‘opportunistic’ violence perpetrated during the *Bheeshanaya*. Anil’s narrative, in congruence with that of others featured in this chapter, suggests that what made terror intolerable was uncertainty about one’s neighbours and their capacity for betrayal. ‘Intimate’ sociality here is shown to increase suspicion, uncertainty, and the threat of violence in times of

terror. Life after terror then involves recreating everyday sociality with intimates in the face of this knowledge.

Anil emphasises the senselessness of ‘opportunistic’ violence: “It happened over such petty things... perhaps I may have said some little thing that the other person took offence at, and in the evening I would be killed”. Rather than being extraordinary acts of irrationality or sudden madness, as implied by Anil, the narratives featured in this chapter suggest extreme aggravation and accentuation of the ‘normal’ socio-political dynamics that characterise everyday life in times of non-terror, to have contributed to the wider violence of the *Bheeshanaya*. At the same time, the Terror itself exacerbated existing tensions, created new cleavages at the grassroots, and altered existing local dynamics, thereby increasing the likelihood of violence between ‘intimates’. Nevertheless, it is important to note that people overwhelmingly remembered the violence of the *Bheeshanaya* as an abnormality and spoke of experiencing it as an aberration.

Anil expresses his support for the violence of the counter-insurrection by stating that if the insurrection had not been crushed, the entire country would have been consumed by revenge and denunciation, leading to its ultimate annihilation. The capacity of ‘ordinary’ civilians (who had suspended their sense of rationality and morals) to sustain the Terror is depicted as having the power to potentially destroy society itself. Brute force is thereby necessary to restore a sense of (moral) order. Anil moreover, recounts his story of revenge and denunciation mainly in the third person, showing it to have taken place between others, speaking in the first person only to hypothetically position himself as a potential victim. As well as distancing himself from this form of violence, in doing so he implicitly emphasises his innocence by stressing his own potential vulnerability to ‘opportunistic’ violence.

Negotiating Everyday Life through Terror

Some people employed stories of revenge and denunciation to express how they dealt with violence and to portray what everyday life was like during the Terror. People remembered drawing on a range of strategies to negotiate their very survival, which is in congruence with Green’s contention that survival for people living in a chronic state of fear depends on a panoply of responses (1999: 55–56). The everyday negotiation of terror was rooted in the careful management of sociality with

‘intimates’, and in a fear of ‘intimates’ (especially their capacity to perpetrate ‘opportunistic’ violence). Terror then is shown to alter social interaction and to drive “a wedge of paranoia” (Green 1999) into the heart of ‘intimate’ relationships. Suspicion now becomes the primary marker in negotiating sociality and takes on a protective quality, as the narratives below demonstrate.

Several research participants told me that they chose to distance themselves from their neighbours due to mistrust and fear, as they retreated into the relative ‘safety’ of the immediate family. However, they stressed that they were careful to avoid the frightening consequences of unintentional snubs, by maintaining basic polite and cordial relationships at a superficial level (e.g., when bumping into a neighbour on the street). Some, on the other hand, spoke of treading a delicate path by balancing relationships with people of opposing political sides, regardless of whether they agreed or disagreed with the political agendas of these factions. This was a dangerous course to follow, but deemed necessary for survival by people who felt that they were caught in the middle of opposing factions. Raja (who participated in the conversation earlier in this chapter) told me that he secretly maintained a congenial relationship with the army through his soldier brother’s contacts. At the same time, he made an effort to sustain a good relationship with the JVP leader of his village (despite him privately praising the actions of the counter-insurrectionary forces in crushing the JVP). Raja described taking “energy drinks” and tending to the JVP insurgent leader of his village, Kollu, when the latter was laid up in bed having sustained injuries from a security-forces ambush. This parlous strategy could have brought on calamitous results. But for Raja this carefully thought out response to terror secured his life when Kollu later intervened in an incident where JVP cadres in the village set out to kill him (as we saw in the earlier conversation between Raja and Hiran).

Others recalled making the onerous effort to go out of their way to be painfully ‘nice’ to their neighbours, driven primarily by the desire to avoid being the object of denunciation or revenge. Naren, an academic, who witnessed the insurrection as a young boy in the remote and impoverished village in which he grew up, told me:

There was no trust in our village at all. Everyone made a special effort in their behaviour towards each other. Everyone was scared of each other in the community. Since you didn’t know who was on what side, and due to fear of

denouncers, everyone made a special effort to be nice to each other. So because we were scared of denunciations we tried to be friends with all. Before this there were a lot of land disputes. But during this time these disputes reduced as people tried to be nice to everyone else.

Trust is not merely replaced by suspicion but rather it is manipulated, as social interactions at a superficial level are conducted under its pretence. Naren's story, like the others featured in this chapter, substantiates anthropological findings on the lived reality of terror that have mainly emerged from studies based on the South American context of the 1970s and 1980s. These "cultures of terror" have been shown to have their own "grammar" and underlying structures (Taussig 1989 and 2004, Suarez-Orozco 1990). The devastating impact of terror on community relationships and its fearful psychological grip on individuals and entire populations, along with the intricate meshing of its salient features such as fear, uncertainty, silence, suspicion, panic and paranoia have been illustrated in this work (see Green 1999, Taussig 2004, Warren 2000, Suarez-Orozco 1990).

The notion of uncertainty nurtured by violence featured strongly throughout people's narratives. Uncertainty here is largely depicted as being epistemological in nature. It is concerned with what one really knows about neighbours and friends, and is grounded in the notion of 'intimacy' itself. As we have seen, people had to grapple with the uncertainty of who the dreaded denouncers and abductors were - whether they could perhaps be an 'intimate', whether neighbours and friends could really be trusted, and what their real agendas and affiliations were. Appadurai (2000) in his article on ethnic violence in the context of globalisation argues that, in the face of uncertainty violence creates its own macabre form of certainty. Conversely, in the narratives here, violence is consistently shown to perpetuate uncertainty and confusion. The majority of stories on 'opportunistic' violence drew clear connections between terror, uncertainty, and 'intimacy'. Naren's narrative echoes that of Anil (as seen earlier in this chapter), in suggesting that the intolerability of terror is rooted in uncertainty about one's neighbours and that sociality with 'intimates' magnifies the potential threat of violence during times of terror.

Giving Meaning to Morally Incomprehensible Violence

In his compelling study of Holocaust survivors based on videotaped interviews, Langer (1991) points to a duality in memory that runs through their oral testimonies. Deep memory, he contends, attempts to recall the self as it was then (i.e., “the Auschwitz self”), while common memory on the other hand “restores the self to its pre- and post camp routines” and “offers detached portraits from the vantage point of today, of what it must have been like then” (1991: 6). The struggles between these two kinds of memories and their intrusions on each other, is used by Langer to explain the gaps and disruptions that stutter the flow of these traumatic narratives. The exchange between common and deep memory was also evident in narratives of the *Bheeshanaya*, as stories appeared to hurtle between these categories of memory at various points. This chapter opened with an extract from an interview I had with former insurgent Kanchana, who referred to the “big terror” that he experienced in his head when he recalled the *Bheeshanaya*. Memories of fear, loneliness, uncertainty, and gruesome images of violence, flashed through his narrative, following no particular order – remembering the self as it were during the Terror. This engagement with his deep memory was interspersed with interruptions by his common memory, as he attempted to reflect retrospectively on his experiences of violence, remembering the function of society during the *Bheeshanaya* to be lawless and uncivilised.

I was struck by the raw and very present quality in people’s narratives of the *Bheeshanaya* overall, and particularly when they spoke of the impact of violence and betrayal on human relationships. This may be understood in terms of Langer’s classification of deep memory. There were further points at which people attempted to comprehend and allocate an ethical space to, the occurrence of violence between ‘intimates’ in their stories, which would suggest their common memory to be at work, as these were retrospective reflections from the “vantage point of today” (Langer 1991: 6). However, in the context of the *Bheeshanaya*, people’s mediation of memory and their depictions of violence were in no way “detached” as suggested by Langer in his reference to the working of common memory with regard to the narratives of Holocaust survivors. The act of remembering the ‘opportunistic’ violence that took place between ‘intimates’ during the *Bheeshanaya* was shaped by the context of recollection, and people’s engagement with past violence carried moral resonance for their sense of self and social relationships in the present.

Shehan is a former insurgent who had recently left the JVP through disillusionment. He explained the operation of ‘opportunistic’ violence during the *Bheeshanaya* as follows.

Revenge took place across the country. Gangs would dress up as the army and abduct people, and people would pretend to be the JVP and abduct others so that the JVP was blamed. Then there were so many gangs, which had various names like Black Cats, Yellow Cats, Green Tigers, and Eagles. So the Government was killing, the JVP was killing, there were paramilitary groups, and vigilante groups all kidnapping and killing people. You didn’t know who was who, because people would always assume the identity of the opponent. In the midst of all this people lost their way (*minissu ataramang vunā*).

Shehan, like Anil whose story we heard earlier, speaks of revenge as having been a universal occurrence, taking place across the country. Interestingly, as we shall see in Chapter 5, Shehan also appears to contradict this assertion when he states that ‘opportunistic’ violence did not take place in his village, which he puts down to his own thoughtful management of ‘intimate’ community relationships during his tenure as a local insurgent leader. He narrates his story of ‘opportunistic’ violence in the third person, as having taken place between other actors, thereby distancing himself from complicity. Shehan suggests that people “lost their way” or “were stranded” amidst the chaos of terror. This intimates that people were in a sense ‘carried away’ by the violence and their ‘normal’ values and rationality suspended in the process. This explanation of ‘opportunistic’ violence divests its perpetrators of agency and instead represents them as being victims of the overwhelming power of terror. Nevertheless, Shehan’s rationalisation of violence is conducive to the functioning of relationships between people with various degrees of involvement in violence, in the present. However, the accounts of specific incidents of ‘opportunistic’ violence that I gathered for this research show revenge attacks and denunciations to have been well planned, clearly targeted, and backed by specific motivations based on everyday social and political life, rather than being mere acts of irrationality belonging to people swept away by the chaos of the Terror.

Some people depicted society as having gone mad, with ‘ordinary’ people ‘turning on each other’ and indiscriminately denouncing their neighbours. They in

turn tended to make sense of this violence by blaming it on the ‘nature’ of Sinhala people. This implied that perpetrating ‘opportunistic’ violence in this instance was somehow biologically and culturally intrinsic to the Sinhala people, and thereby unavoidable. Within the confines of the Sinhala community, people frequently bemoan certain stereotyped negative traits they claim to be peculiar to their ethnic group (e.g., envy, readiness to back-stab, greed).²⁶ These negative stereotypes in reality function as a strategy to differentiate Sinhala people from other ethnic groups, particularly Tamils and Muslims, who are commonly assumed to be united and loyal to others belonging to their respective ethnic communities (see Herzfeld 1997).

Many research participants drew on these existing myths and ‘shared secrets’ to make sense of the morally incomprehensible occurrence of ‘opportunistic’ violence. Having first reassured themselves of my own Sinhala background, people were quick to draw on such negative stereotypical traits to explain what they saw as a descent into brutality, where people trampled each other for personal gain during the *Bheeshanaya*. There is a common joke that does the rounds within the Sinhala community, which was repeated to me by many of my research participants, albeit with slight variations to suit the context of the Terror. It goes along the lines of there being three large pits dug deep into the ground in hell – one pit to house each of the main ethnic groups in Sri Lanka (Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims). While security guards surround the pits of the Tamils and Muslims to guard against escapees, the Sinhala pit is left unguarded. The reason for this, I was told, was that if one Sinhala person tried to escape, the others in the pit would be sure to drag her or him back down themselves or to denounce them to the other guards.

This intimate joke, while appearing divisive on the surface, in reality functioned to represent Sinhala people as a distinct and cohesive community, by recasting negative cultural myths and laying bare “the sore zones of cultural sensitivity” (Herzfeld 1997: x). Here, in people’s attempts to give meaning to the ‘opportunistic’ violence that took place within their ‘intimate’ worlds we can see the workings of what Herzfeld (1997) has referred to as “cultural intimacy”. Herzfeld draws on “cultural intimacy” in order to understand people’s notions of self-identity within the wider realm of nationalism. According to him, “cultural intimacy” exists in those supposed national traits, “the self-styled stereotypes that insiders express ostensibly at their own collective expense” which entails a “recognition of those

²⁶ People used the term *jatiya* to mean ‘race’ or ‘ethnic group’ here. The direct translation of *jatiya* is ‘type’ or ‘kind’ e.g., ‘our kind’, but generally denotes ‘ethnic group’ or caste.

aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality” (1997: 3).

In a *Bheeshanaya* that in many cases destroyed the ties that held communities together, people drew on essentialising strategies to make sense of their morally unsettling memories of ‘intimate’ violence. In doing so, they were trying to re-imagine a sense of ‘intimate’ community in the aftermath of violence, where silence permeated and reconciliation was lacking. Telling stories of a violent past in this manner then demonstrates the need to belong to a sense of ‘intimate’ community, particularly when “the bonds of such belonging are violently sundered” (Jackson 2002: 34).

This is further elaborated in an extract from Bandula’s narrative. Bandula is a former JVP insurgent who had left the movement towards the end of 1989. His brother, who was also a JVP insurgent, was disappeared in detention. Having established my own Sinhala Buddhist background, he told me in a confidential tone and somewhat disillusioned manner:

Our race (*jātiya*) is too greedy (*perēta*), jealous (*irisiyāva*), and want to drag each other down. You could see that so clearly in the 1980s when people just took personal revenge and denounced each other. A revolution can never succeed among our race... Even my brother was taken in (to detention) based on a denunciation (*pāvādīma*). His good friend, whom he trusted, with whom he stayed and ate, later denounced him.

Bandula employs negative cultural stereotypes and draws on ‘known secrets’ to make sense of his experience of ‘opportunistic’ violence, which in turn he blames for the failure of the insurrection. ‘Cultural intimacy’ involves a “familiarity with perceived social flaws that offer culturally persuasive explanations for apparent deviations from public interest” (Herzfeld 1997: 9). Bandula attempts to ground his rationalisation of violence that went against community interest, in culturally persuasive and familiar arguments. At the same time he attempts to express a sense of ‘intimate’ Sinhala community, ‘warts and all’, in the aftermath of terror.

In stressing that his brother was denounced by a close friend, Bandula brings to the fore questions about the solidarity of friendship and values that underpin

‘intimate’ relationships. He says that his brother trusted his denouncer and extended hospitality to him, thereby acknowledging the betrayal of ‘intimate trust’ and the transgression of important cultural values that cement social relationships in Sinhala Buddhist communities. Interestingly, Bandula avoids giving any indication as to whether he or his brother (as JVP insurgents) were involved in perpetrating revenge themselves. In choosing to frame his experience of ‘opportunistic’ violence around the denunciation of his brother, he clearly occupies the moral category of ‘victim’ in this story, thereby rejecting accountability for this form of violence.

Coming to Terms with Revenge

Revenge operated at various levels, took numerous forms, and involved those from across the political and social landscape. This section considers in some detail, two narratives of revenge, paying attention to the ways in which people attempt to come to terms with the violence they experienced and its implications for the functioning of social relationships post-terror.

Ishan is an amiable young mechanic who runs his own garage. During the *Bheeshanaya* his brother Asela, was taken in by the security forces for suspected insurgent activity. Asela was held in a detention centre and tortured, after which he was returned to the family. One week after his return Asela was abducted once again. This time he disappeared for good. His family was initially led to believe that those who took him away the second time were also members of the security forces. However, Ishan’s own subsequent investigation into the disappearance of his brother found it to be a case of revenge carried out by business rivals. According to Ishan, this was based on their jealousy of Asela’s success in the business community and the threat he posed to his competitors. Ishan’s story is as follows.

My brother didn’t do JVP. But as a businessman if someone from the JVP asked for help – for things like a car or goods, people gave them. Some gave out of fear for their lives. People felt that everyone was on the side of the JVP. With just one poster they could shut down the whole town, through fear. Others genuinely helped them out because they sympathised with them. He came back from the camp (detention centre) in X. He had been tortured. So he was in hospital for two weeks after that. Then he was disappeared. We didn’t know

where he was. We went to all the camps and spent a lot of time searching all over for him. He just disappeared. No trace of him. Later through my own personal investigations I found out who was responsible. It was his business competitors. It was purely a personal grievance. Unlike me, my brother as a businessman interacted closely with many people in the business community. Because of my brother's experience, I now do business in a different way. I am in business but I don't engage with lots of people. I prefer to do business on my own. Even in the business community now you can't trust anyone. You don't know what agendas they come with.

Ishan's story is typical of the kind of personal score-settling that took place during the *Bheeshanaya*. His story illustrates the difficult situations that people faced in their everyday lives during the Terror, having to balance relationships with, and appease various opposing factions. His dominant memories attached to the 'opportunistic' violence he experienced are of fear, confusion, uncertainty, and the lack of recourse to legal authority, which forced survivors to carry the additional burden of investigating the cases of their missing loved-ones themselves. Ishan's story significantly conveys the impact of memories of violence on sociality in the present. He emphasises mistrust and suspicion to be legacies of the *Bheeshanaya*, and shows his experience of violence to have resulted in a significant alteration of his own behaviour and approach to social relationships post-terror.

Sheyanthi's story below, complements this in highlighting the legacy of violence and its implications for the recreation of sociality post-terror. Its significance lies in how the victim's family attempts to come to terms with, and respond to, the violence they experienced. Sheyanthi is a young attractive mother, of rural middle-class background. Her mother was murdered during the *Bheeshanaya*, seemingly by the JVP. However, Sheyanthi's narrative suggests that it may have been a case of personal score-settling rather than a political killing by the JVP.

My mother was a pillar of the community. Our house was where everyone in the village came. People were always given food at ours. She was so respected and loved.... It was really my mother who took the family forward (*pavula issarahāṭa geniccē*). So it was a huge loss. It was a case of personal revenge (*pudgalika paligānīma*) to destroy our family. They wanted our family to fail. But we didn't. Our family survived. We were not destroyed. We all managed and forged ahead. We all got ourselves an education, and we all got decent jobs, without the help of any politicians. We were not given any warning, nor were we issued commands about how the funeral should be carried out. A man who

we didn't recognise came to the house. Ours was a house, which always saw people coming and going. And anyway, we were never guilty of doing anything wrong, so had no need to fear strangers even during that time. The man just came in and shot my mother and left... My brother chased after the man but never caught him. My brother is so angry and has that anger in him even today.

They never found the person who murdered my mother. There are people I suspect. But we don't chase after it to find out because what he did was *pav* (demerit, bad karma) and he will have to deal with the natural repercussions. It was the JVP who did it. They put posters up saying (so)... We weren't hassled again in any other way. He tried to destroy the family, but it was a success for us. We made it a success by studying hard and finding jobs ourselves. When the police wanted me to identify the man and give a description I didn't. We didn't denounce anyone. I don't want to fill my life with *pav* (sin, bad karma). That man must also have a wife and children. The wife and children may be perfectly innocent people. I don't want to destroy their family. The man who did that won't ever do well in life. After that incident we moved away from society. Our family was always involved in village affairs. But after that we stopped engaging in society as much. If someone asks for help we give it. We still go for funerals or *pinkam* (Buddhist merit-making rituals). But that is all. We don't get involved with the society beyond that.

Sheyanthi's story illustrates the confusion that surrounds incidents of revenge that took place during the *Bheeshanaya*. With opportunists taking on the guise of either the JVP, security forces, or another group, people were unsure as to who killed or disappeared their loved ones. She shows violence here to create further ambiguity and uncertainty, particularly when it comes to holding people to account. At one point she believes the attack to be a case of personal revenge, motivated by jealousy of the apparent success of her family. However, at another point she states that the JVP carried out the murder and remembers posters put up by the JVP acknowledging responsibility for it. The murder may have been carried out by an opportunistic JVP supporter with a personal grievance against the family, by the JVP itself, or by an ordinary person under the guise of the JVP. The victim's family is not likely to get to the truth of the matter.

Sheyanthi engages in a moral critique of 'opportunistic' violence, which is rooted in Buddhist ethics. In opening her story with a remembrance of her mother as a popular and upright member of the community (which was affirmed to me by several other people in her village), she sets the context of her moral evaluation of revenge and makes a clear distinction between her mother who was the victim on the one hand, and the morally reprehensible perpetrator of 'opportunistic' violence on the other hand. Sheyanthi invokes the Buddhist ethical framework of *karma* as a coping

mechanism in her attempts to come to terms with, and make sense of, her experience of violence. She rationalises that the perpetrator will have to suffer the karmic consequences of his crime. She also later told me that the person she suspected of murdering her mother was already suffering terribly in life. Reflecting on past violence through Buddhist ethics inadvertently works to prevent further acts of violence post-terror in the form of revenge attacks, particularly in the absence of justice and reparation. By telling herself that the natural law of *karma* would ensure that justice is meted out to her mother's murderer, she finds a way of deflecting resentment, reconciling her past, and continuing to live with those responsible for violence post-terror.

Sheyanthi emphasises that she is careful not to engage in bad *karma* herself and that she even refused to give a description of the perpetrator to the police – an act she classifies as denunciation. Through this she makes a clear her moral judgment on denunciation, and distances herself from it. Her narrative is an empowering one, in which she represents herself as 'defeating' the perpetrator of violence both in moral and practical terms. In a situation that she was unable to control, Sheyanthi emphasises defying the odds and making life a success, while further refusing to 'stoop' to the level of the murderer by partaking in bad *karma* (immoral acts) herself. In doing so she reconstructs her experience of violence, and her notions of the self, in order to make her past more tolerable to live with in the present. She also implies the success in her life and her adherence to Buddhist ethics to be her own form of 'revenge' against the man who murdered her mother. This attests to Jackson's argument about the capacity for people to alter the balance of power between "actor" ('perpetrator') and "acted upon" ('victim') through the stories they tell, thus giving people a sense of control and agency in situations that left them feeling disempowered and overwhelmed (Jackson 2002: 16).

Sociological analyses of revenge, particularly relating to 'societies of honour' suggest a regulatory element to revenge and a predictable pattern that follows a violent act, entailing appropriate and commendable retaliation. Gould for instance argues that revenge is part of a social system and occurs when "a social group's reputation for cohesiveness has been damaged by a collaborative attack" (2000: 683). However, this did not seem to apply to many cases of revenge and personal score-settling that I came across in the Sri Lankan context, as seen in the two incidents discussed above. For instance, Sheyanthi's refusal to even give a description of the aggressor to the police, defies a predictable course of events that sociological analyses

would usually ascribe to such an aggressive act, directed arguably at the solidarity of her family. Rather than triggering a course of vengeance, Sheyanthi instead chooses to make sense of the event through her religious beliefs, and focuses on making a success of her own life. Similarly, in Ishan's case, the attack on his family by business rivals is not met with further vengeance. Having carried out his own investigation into the disappearance of his brother Ishan chooses not to retaliate, and instead uses the experience to alter his own approach to social interaction with the community.

Using Revenge as a Political and Military Weapon

Revenge and denunciation were also commonly remembered by people, particularly those who observed the violence and were not officially linked to any political faction, as being utilised as political weapons in the military battle between the state and the JVP. There have been some studies on revenge and militant ideology, notably with reference to the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka (see Hinton 1998, De Silva 2002), compared to the relatively sparse academic attention paid to the workings of revenge in periods of terror among 'ordinary' civilians at the grassroots. The political revenge attacks themselves were staged in public, mainly to instil fear, to deter, to assert power and control, and in some cases to justify the attacks to the public. Attacks carried out by the JVP were accompanied by posters, explaining why the victims deserved to be punished. Latterly, some sections of the security forces, as well as other 'unknown gangs' also mimicked the JVP by communicating reasons for their targeting of specific victims. On the part of the security forces, revenge was directed at group solidarity, rather than at the particular JVP insurgents who may have been responsible for violence. This involved the murder of people who were supporters of the JVP (whether or not they had committed a crime), those who were friends of JVP supporters, and those who inhabited villages where support for the JVP was assumed to be strong (mainly due to social disadvantage). Others, who by virtue of their age and gender were perceived as potentially belonging to the JVP, were also targeted (see Gunaratna 1990).

The JVP further used revenge as part of its rhetoric, largely couched in terms of ‘punishing traitors’. ‘Traitor’ was particularly powerful in justifying the violence of the JVP. It was used to describe those who were seen as ‘un-patriotic’ (*deshadrohi*), and those who in the eyes of the JVP were obstructing the course of the revolution. While at the inception of the insurrection this term was tight in encompassing supporters of the UNP and the ‘Indian invaders’, as time went on interpretations of this label became looser and expanded to include various individuals and groups who were accused of disobeying the orders of the JVP. People who had witnessed the violence of the Terror, along with a small number of former insurgents who had since left the JVP, told me that at the height of the *Bheeshanaya* the term ‘traitor’ was used as an easy excuse by some individual cadres to settle personal scores.

The retrospective retelling of one particularly ‘infamous’ episode (widely considered to have been the turning-point of the ‘revolution’) is in itself steeped in the notion of revenge. The event in question concerned the ultimate threat issued by the JVP to the security forces. This is commonly regarded as the JVP’s biggest mistake and that which sealed its fate. The widely accepted official history, as professed by the state, the media, and recorded in literature on the Terror, goes along the following lines (see Gunaratna 1990, Chandraprema 1991). Between the months of July and August 1989, the JVP embarked on the final (and fatal) step of their revolutionary strategy. Convinced that success was close at hand, they issued a warning to the security forces, via a poster-campaign, to abandon their posts and join the “patriotic revolutionaries” or to face having their families being punished (see Gunaratna 1990, Chandraprema 1991).²⁷ In response to this threat, a surge of retaliatory posters were put up by the security forces throughout most of the country. These ominously warned the JVP that for every family member of the security forces killed, the latter would respond by killing 12 JVP insurgents (Chandraprema 1991). The following weeks witnessed the families of several members of the security forces being brutally murdered. This raised the stakes, and the security forces who had thus far appeared reluctant to crack down on the JVP now showed renewed commitment to eliminating the JVP. A heightened period of terror ensued, with the armed forces, police, paramilitaries, vigilantes, and the JVP carrying out revenge attacks on each other. The revolutionary organisation that had apparently been impossible to crush for two and a

²⁷ Communication between the JVP and state counter-insurrectionary forces (and the general population) often took place via posters that would appear on walls across the country.

half years was eliminated in a matter of months, apparently fuelled by the thirst for revenge.

Almost all the former insurgents (and a few ‘witnesses’ of violence with no avowed allegiance to either the state or the JVP) I spoke to, rejected outright this official history of the demise of the insurgency, and instead offered an alternative history. This counter-narrative also afforded the notion of revenge a prominent position in the history of the *Bheeshanaya*. While it shared some basic similarities with the official history (which was undoubtedly required to enhance its credibility) it also diverged at significant points thereby substantiating its oppositional stance. Former insurgents generally agreed that the threat to members of the security forces had indeed been issued by the JVP. The JVP (and the majority of the Sinhala population) had believed that the success of the revolution was close at hand, and this demand was seen as the final step towards capturing state power.

However, their memory diverged from the master narrative on the point of the JVP implementing this threat in actuality. Former insurgents remembered the UNP regime as having exploited the opportunity that this threat afforded to crush the JVP once-and-for all, by pitting the security forces against the JVP. According to them, the threat was intended by the JVP merely to frighten, but not to be implemented. This oppositional memory held that state counter-insurrectionary elements murdered the families of prominent security-personnel themselves under the guise of the JVP. This was done in order to instigate a thirst for revenge amongst members of the security forces, who had thus far been reluctant to crack down on the JVP, and to bring the revolutionary movement into disrepute. Many former insurgents reasoned that the JVP would not have murdered the families of the security forces, since the JVP and the rank and file of the army had forged close links nurtured at village-level. Moreover, the kin and childhood friends of many JVP cadres were in the security forces serving as ordinary soldiers. As one ex-insurgent Senahami, who had participated in both insurrections, put it:

We had a lot of support from them (the army). They supported the JVP because they were our rural village boys (*gambada kollo*). They knew disadvantage/oppression (*pīḍanaya*), suffering. They also experienced discrimination in the army – having to constantly salute to big (high status) people (*loku minissu*). Their mess is different to that of the higher status officers who get good food and drink. Also many of their own brothers and sisters were in the JVP. So they didn’t want to kill them. But then after the poster incident

the army went crazy and came after us. But even at that time not all of them did. People didn't want to kill others from their own village. Most of the killings were contracted out to vigilantes and para-military groups by the Government.

Through the use of kinship metaphors (e.g., our rural village boys), Senahami establishes a sense of intimacy between the oppositional forces of the JVP and state security forces. In his narrative reconstruction of the *Bheeshanaya*, the work of re-imagining a sense of 'cultural intimacy' in this way, serves to break down the binaries created by the Terror and to bind together social relationships torn apart by violence.

This alternative memory clearly absolves the JVP (and its insurgents) of responsibility for the morally questionable act of perpetrating violence against one's 'intimates'. Instead, through the use of 'conspiracy theory'²⁸ it deflects blame onto their old foes – the UNP regime itself, which it accuses of utilising 'opportunistic' violence as a military strategy to destroy the JVP and its insurrection. This oppositional narrative reflected a lived reality in which communities fractured by violence were forced to function in the absence of any form of reconciliation. A version of history that denied moral culpability for the perpetration of violence against 'intimates', was arguably deemed necessary to re-imagine and reconstruct 'intimate' social relationships post-terror. This alternative memory also reflected the political context in which these stories of violence were being retold. This was a context of recall that was dominated by the civil war between the state and Tamil militants, accompanied by a vociferous nationalist rhetoric that demanded clear affiliation with an imagined homogenous Sinhala community. Moreover, the revamped JVP of the political mainstream had fashioned itself as the champion of Sinhala nationalism and was keen to emphasise its support for the state security forces locked in battle with Tamil militants in the North. Memories acknowledging responsibility for violence against family members of the security forces, who were now popularly portrayed as heroes defending the monolithic Sinhala community, would have been morally indigestible for the popular local audience. This rendered necessary an oppositional narrative that categorically and credibly denied culpability for such violence. It is worth noting that supporters of the state during the *Bheeshanaya* (including UNP supporters and former counter-insurrectionary officers) vehemently rejected this

²⁸ The use of the term 'conspiracy theory' here is not intended to cast doubt over the validity of this version of history. Given the level of contestation, it is impossible to verify the 'truth' of this claim. I used this phrase here instead to refer to the narrative device drawn on by research participants to put forward an alternative 'truth' of the *Bheeshanaya*.

alternative narrative as “a lie” concocted by the JVP leadership in order to avert blame for their actions during the *Bheeshanaya* for purposes of political expediency.

The stories of revenge and denunciation in this chapter show memories of violence to be ethically tendentious. The particular ethical charge of ‘opportunistic’ violence lay in its betrayal of ‘intimacy’ and in its ‘personal’ agenda, which distinguished this kind of violence from the more ‘palatable’ political acts of violence. People used the idiom of ‘opportunistic’ violence to comment on the ways in which violence seeps into ‘intimate’ relationships, and to express the difficulties encountered in maintaining a benevolent form of ‘intimate’ sociality amidst terror. Moreover, ‘opportunistic violence’ provided an avenue through which people were able to critique and comprehend the morally unsettling violence of their recent past. These morally burdensome memories were intricately shaped by a post-terror reality in which everyday sociality must be renegotiated among ‘intimates’ who are left with various amounts of ‘blood on their hands’. In anchoring their memories of violence in the moral, people attempted to re-imagine a sense of an intimate ‘moral’ community that had been fractured by violence. In the next two chapters we explore further the ways in which people inject an ethical charge into memories of violence, by rooting them in ‘intimate’ social worlds, through their narratives on torture.

Chapter 3

Talking About Torture: Stories of Torture Survivors

The JVP's threats to the families of the security forces in the summer of 1989 brought forth a ferocious campaign of state violence that led to a heightened period of terror. In addition to the police and armed forces, state-sponsored paramilitary groups and shadowy vigilante groups stalked their human prey across villages and towns, abducting, torturing, disappearing, and killing those suspected of 'subversive activity'. Meanwhile, defiant sections of the JVP upped their ruthless campaign of violence against suspected informants and other 'traitors', in a battle with the state they were rapidly losing, given the superior man and fire-power of the former, and their own dwindling popularity due to their excesses of violence. Much like the JVP's malleable term 'traitor', which was used very loosely to target its victims, 'anti-government subversives' was a label used with little discretion by its opponent, and those hunted relentlessly by the counter-insurrectionary forces²⁹ under its premise all too often included people who had little or no involvement in the JVP.

As in many other contexts of terror around the world, torture was a central and disturbing characteristic of Sri Lanka's *Bheeshanaya*, and it featured prominently in people's memories. Torture was extensively used by the Sri Lankan state to ostensibly crush the insurrection. It served to deter and punish 'anti-government subversives', assert state authority, and instil fear. The measures taken by the UNP regime to counter the threat posed to its authority by 'anti-Government subversives' entailed the temporary occupation of private and public property by the state security forces.³⁰ These, in addition to existing army camps and police stations, made for make-shift 'detention centres'. This term was used by the state to refer to spaces that in reality functioned as torture chambers. For people of the localities in which they were situated, these places were simply known as *vadakāgāra* (torture chambers), and formed yet another feature of the terror they had to traverse. The rapidity with which torture chambers (*vadakāgāra*) sprung up across the central and

²⁹ I use the term 'counter-insurrectionary forces' as an all-inclusive term, which refers to all those groups engaged in crushing the insurrection. These include the police, security forces, paramilitary groups and vigilante groups, the majority of them being state-sponsored in one form or another.

³⁰ This information is based on anecdotal evidence provided by numerous witnesses, including owners of buildings that were briefly 'occupied' and survivors of torture who told me that they were held in such buildings. For an idea of the kinds of spaces that were temporarily used as 'torture chambers' see Perera's work on ghost narratives that emanated from such spaces of violence in the aftermath of the *Bheeshanaya*, where a public utility building, tourist guest-house, and library are shown to be among the former torture chambers wracked by ghostly disturbances after the Terror (see Perera 2001).

southern landscape, in which many thousands of young people are believed to have languished, is a ‘well-known secret’ of the *Bheeshanaya*. Torture during the *Bheeshanaya* is a subject that continues to be shrouded in fear and silence.

In this chapter we turn our attention to torture survivors (mainly former insurgents), and consider their memories and narratives of torture. In speaking clearly as ‘victims’ of violence here, former insurgents throw into question the value and applicability of discrete categories such as ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’. While this chapter looks at how those who were subjected to torture remember and talk about their experiences, the next chapter focuses on stories belonging to those who inflicted it (i.e., former counter-insurrectionary officers). Torture as a particular form of violence entailing coercive interrogation, has the capacity to elicit powerful affective responses among many of us, often causing readers to recoil from the subject. The particular repugnance that torture engenders largely boils down to its interactions with particular conceptualisations of the body, pain, and language (see Daniel 1996, Scarry 2004 and 1985, Das 2007, Aretxaga 2001.), that we shall see emerge through the course of this chapter.

My pre-occupation here is with how people remember and articulate their experiences of this particular form of violence, and the meanings they ascribe to it. This takes on particular significance in light of recent compelling anthropological contentions about the inexpressibility of torture and problems of giving voice to pain (see Daniel 1996, Scarry 1985 and 2004, Das 2007). My own empirical findings suggest that torture is not inevitable as to categorically prevent its expression. Torture survivors are not a homogenous group, and while some people were able to communicate their experiences of torture, others were not. Based on what people who had experienced torture told me, I argue here that where violence appeared to be verbally inexpressible, people drew on various alternative means of communication to articulate their memories of torture. Furthermore, through their narratives of torture, former insurgents created the space to engage in a moral critique of state violence and to communicate specific ethical values.

Some scholars on violence have argued that torture is a “hyper-individuating” experience, devoid of meaning, and that pain is an end in itself (see Scarry 1985, 2004, Daniel 1996, Aretxaga 2001). A central contention of this thesis is that torture has meaning, both for ‘victims’ as well as for those who perpetrate it (as we shall see in the following chapter). This in itself contributes to its very abhorrence. The narratives of torture that run through the pages of this chapter, show its experience to

be remembered in collective and moral terms, and as being rooted in human relationships and ‘intimate’ social worlds.

The Torture Chamber

The use of torture by the state during the *Bheeshanaya* was not unusual or unprecedented. Torture continues to be used as a matter of routine by the state apparatus in Sri Lanka, particularly by the police and security forces. Human rights watchdogs, most notably the Asian Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International, have consistently highlighted the “widespread”, “habitual”, and “endemic” use of torture by the Sri Lankan police and security forces from the 1980s through to the present, in numerous public statements, press releases, and reports. The abduction, further torture and even murder of those who seek to complain about torture in Sri Lanka has also been brought to light, along with the impunity offered to torturers and lack of political will to address the violation of human rights by state authorities.³¹ What was anomalous about the practice of torture during the *Bheeshanaya* was its widespread use and the special designation of public and private civilian spaces throughout the Sinhala-speaking areas of the country for this purpose.

With reference to Tamil detainees held between 1983 and 1987 by the Sri Lankan security forces, Daniel claims that the aim was for torture to leave no visible marks that could be provided as evidence to an investigating magistrate (1996: 139). De Silva’s (2005) response to his statement in her study of the notorious Embilipitiya case, where 22 schoolboys from the village of Embilipitiya were abducted and disappeared by the security forces during the *Bheeshanaya*, gives us an idea of the prevalence of torture perpetrated by the state during this period:

The very mass-based nature of the second (JVP) Uprising militated against such niceties: in a situation where thousands of detainees were imprisoned and released everyday on an island-wide basis, investigating magistrates had now become something of a legal fiction. Further, every army camp was not supplied with ‘specialist’ torturers – ordinary army functionaries seemed to be learning

³¹ There are numerous reports and articles, which make reference to human rights abuse in Sri Lanka regularly using terms such as “endemic”, “habitual”, and “widespread” to describe the use of torture by the Sri Lankan state. These can be accessed via Amnesty International’s official website www.amnestyinternational.org and the website for the Asian Human Rights Commission www.ahrchk.net

on the job – with results that were not so ‘professional’: many captives did die during torture. (De Silva 2005: 200)

The majority of people I spoke to for the purposes of this research were either detained, or worked (as counter-insurrectionary officers), in specially designated torture chambers situated in army camps, police stations, and temporarily occupied public and private buildings, such as ancestral homes, private business premises, public libraries, and guest-houses. People’s stories were set against these backdrops, and here I intend to briefly build a picture of this backdrop before moving on to examine narratives of torture.

De Silva’s (2005) study contains a vivid description of the torture chamber in which the abducted schoolboys from Embilipitiya were detained. This delineation in many ways typifies the numerous torture chambers that were dotted across the country during the *Bheeshanaya*. The torture chamber described in her study was known as the *mas kaḍē* (the butchers). It was located in a large communal bathroom with a line of toilets in one corner, at the camp of the Sixth Artillery Regiment. What stood out for survivors interviewed by De Silva, was the pungent odour of “a butcher’s outlet” and the clutter of “material remnants of human pain - whole finger nails, hair, blood, and even fragments of flesh” (2005: 200). Based on the testimony of her research participants, De Silva goes on to describe a room that was bare except for the torture implements that included a wooden hammer, an iron rod, various batons, and bags of chilli-powder, and “a comfortable armchair...for the officer conducting the operation to sit on” (2005: 200).

What lingered in the memories of torture survivors I spoke to were the smells, the sounds, the sights, and the extreme emotions aroused, in the places in which they were held captive. Survivors of torture emphasised severe over-crowding, appalling sanitation, and the spread of disease that resulted from this. I was given graphic descriptions of the overpowering smell of blood, of ‘death’, and of scorched flesh; the sight of fresh corpses and wounded bodies crumpled on the floor; and of the sounds of beating and cries of distress. People’s narratives were stuttered by the emotions brought on by these painful memories. The sensations of sight, sound, and smell, served to heighten the sense of terror associated with this form of violence, and aroused emotions of intense isolation, fear, powerlessness, and a sense of proximity to death, which run through the narratives of torture survivors.

Speech and Silence: the Context of Recall

The post-terror social and political context of recall that shaped people's stories of torture was one of fear, silence, forgetting, and denial, largely imposed by the powerful official narrative. Remembering and articulating experiences of torture was not only traumatic, but also dangerous. The almost deafening silence that continues to shroud the perpetration of torture during the *Bheeshanaya* is largely of a protective nature. In a continuing climate of impunity, where people are literally faced with 'living with torturers'³² (many of whom continue to occupy powerful positions in the state and political apparatus), silence and amnesia reflects a valid and pragmatic concern to protect the self from personal or political reprisals.

Survivors of torture who participated in this research insisted that I arrived at their houses for interviews under cover of darkness to avoid arousing the suspicion of neighbours. They grilled me incessantly to gauge my trust-worthiness before agreeing to divulge their memories of torture. Fear marked their narratives, and was evident in their apprehensive body language and whispering voices. Nevertheless, what struck me was their apparent eagerness to break the silence on the violence they had been forced to endure, and to challenge the denial of the official narrative. The moral credence afforded by the subject position of 'victim', one that research participants readily occupied (as opposed to that of 'perpetrator'), appeared to break down some of the barriers that stood in the way of 'sharing' memories of violence.

During the course of conducting interviews with torture survivors, it became evident to me that a sense of shame and concern about loss of face appeared to mediate their memories of torture. This was particularly evident through their body language and the gaps, abrupt silences, and clear discomfort, which interrupted their narratives at certain points, particularly when it came to violence that entailed specific forms of humiliation or degradation (e.g., sexual abuse). In a society where *lājja* (shame) and *tatvaya* (social status) carry deep cultural resonance, this was compounded by a concern to prevent loss of face and protect one's own self-image (see Spencer 1999, Obeyesekere 1984, De Silva 2005). My own positioning as a relatively young, female researcher further had an influence here. Some research participants told me directly that it was inappropriate to share with me certain details

³² To borrow the title of Perera's book on female survivors of the *Bheeshanaya* and other essays (Perera 1995).

of their violent experiences. Levi's (1988) reference to his own incarceration in a Nazi concentration camp sheds some light on the sense of shame that lingers with those who have been subjected to violence. He puts this down partly to being forced to endure dehumanising conditions and live at an "animal level" where one's "moral yardstick was changed" (1988: 54-56).

The Therapeutic Value of Talking: Is it Always Good to Talk?

An issue that niggled at me throughout my time in the field, gaining particular potency when it came to eliciting narratives on torture, concerned the value and consequences of asking people to excavate their traumatic memories of violence. A day of interviews with torture survivors would typically be followed by a restless night of lying awake in bed questioning the point of the overall exercise in encouraging people to actively remember and talk about that which was perhaps best left 'unruffled'. As my research progressed, I came to realise that the silence and forgetting overshadowing the *Bheeshanaya* operated at a superficial level. In fact, I came across many survivors who seemed willing, even eager, to haul the hidden and stifled past of torture out of the shadows, and to provide their own versions of 'truth'. During the course of my fieldwork, I also gradually came to recognise that for some the work of reconstructing an unsettling past offered certain benefits, particularly in terms of self-empowerment and their capacity to negotiate life after terror. The narratives that run through this thesis show the mediation of traumatic memories and their retelling, to enable people to make sense of, and give meaning to, their incomprehensible pasts. As Jackson (2002) has eloquently argued, telling stories can function as a coping mechanism, through which people are able to alter their experience of a past that may have left them feeling overwhelmed or confounded.

Questions concerning the potential benefits of talking about, and remembering, violence as opposed to forgetting and silence, to put it simply, have received significant scholarly attention (see Langer 1997, Jackson 2002, Payne 2008, Das 2007). The field of psychoanalysis has highlighted, perhaps most vividly, the ethical complexities and political tensions that charge debates on memory and narrative in relation to the healing of trauma, primarily through contentions surrounding recovered memory therapy. Recovered memory therapy is fundamentally based on notions that equate forgetting with trauma, which is considered by its

proponents in psychotherapy to be an understandable but negative state of being. It thereby follows that the recovery of memory and its expression brings with it healing (Hacking 1995).

Anthropologists of violence have recently concerned themselves with issues around the representation and narrativisation of violence and pain. The presumption that pain is beyond language has led to the creation of “a therapeutic role and moral space for anthropology, a way of contributing to the social and individual healing process” (Jean-Klein and Riles 2005: 178). Jean-Klein and Riles comment that in this manner, anthropologists assume “a role in assisting victims to re-enter language, sociality, and humanity” and that they “position themselves as professional listeners and even as proto-therapists” (2005: 178–9). Das (1990b) for instance, has pointed to the potential for anthropology to be a form of therapy in the lives of survivors of violence through the sharing and articulation of their pain.

The blurring of boundaries between anthropology and therapy strikes me as somewhat problematic and risky, particularly given the responsibility that we have as anthropologists to the well-being of our research participants who (in a sense) agree to “relive” their traumatic experiences for the purposes of anthropological knowledge (see Aretxaga 2001). Bearing in mind that anthropologists are not trained in psychosocial therapy, to assume such a role in as sensitive a field of inquiry as that of violence (where the subject group more often than not includes people with specific ‘vulnerabilities’) would be ethically tenuous and could potentially have detrimental effects on survivors of torture. Moreover, as Jean-Klein and Riles have pointed out, “what exactly constitutes ‘listening’ remains curiously undefined” (2005: 179). Of course in some cases, as I found in my own research, mediating traumatic memories and reconstructing the past may have its benefits for some people, particularly in allowing them to rework their experiences of violence in order to find ways of coming to terms with it in the present. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind human diversity, along with the ambiguous and subjective experience of violence itself. Those who have experienced violence should not be treated as a homogeneous group, and the sweeping application of an ‘it’s good to talk’ mantra, which ignores individual context and the complexity of human being, carries with it ethnocentric and patronising undertones, along with significant ethical risks.

Many ‘victims’ of torture I came across during my fieldwork refused to talk about their experiences and declined to participate in this research altogether. People had various reasons for not wishing to remember and ‘share’ their traumatic

experiences. Some indicated that they did not see the point of exhuming distressing memories that they had relegated to the past, and a few people implied that this would simply get in the way of dealing with the mundane challenges that they faced in the present everyday. Others, despite showing some initial hesitance, nevertheless expressed a desire to talk about their experiences and with that to work against the silence and amnesia that enveloped the violence of the *Bheeshanaya* overall. It is their stories that fill the pages of this thesis. In that sense, a limit of this research could be considered its bias in featuring only those who believed that there was some benefit (not necessarily cathartic) to the process of remembering and talking about their experiences of violence. Whether the process of sharing their stories with me for the purposes of this research had any sustained ‘therapeutic’ benefits for all my research participants, is impossible to say. And it should not follow that we ignore the concerns of those whose voices are absent from this research about the possible detrimental effects that talking about traumatic experiences could bring.

With reference to Aboriginal people in Australia who have recently begun to publicly give voice to their hitherto untold stories of shared histories and enduring grievances, Jackson draws our attention to the ‘mixed results’ that have arisen from ‘talking’ and ‘sharing’. He suggests that while some find telling their stories to be cathartic, “others feel as though salt has been rubbed into their wounds” (2002: 57). Nevertheless, his overall argument is that telling stories can in some contexts offer a way of bridging “the gap between solitariness and sociality, the singular and the shared” (2002: 62). In her work on stories of the Partition, Butalia ponders similar questions surrounding the dredging up of unpleasant memories, and of talking and healing. She surmises that “the dilemma remains: is it better to be silent or to speak? Or, for the researcher, is it better to ‘allow’ silence or to ‘force’ speech?” (2000: 282). This is indeed a dilemma that persists and it is vital that in considering it, researchers exercise careful ethical and practical judgement based on the particularities of the research context and individual concerned, rather than assuming a ‘one size fits all’ approach.

Communicating Torture

A further complexity surrounding the recollection and articulation of torture concerns the moving of such discomfiting memories from the private realm of

silence to the public realm of narration, and the extent to which these personal experiences of pain could in any real sense be 'shared'. Das rightly emphasises the importance of recognising the relationship between pain and language in the overall exercise of collecting narratives of violence (2007: 55-57). She notes further the absence of "any standing language on pain" short of hysteria (2007: 39). My own visit to a now derelict torture chamber from the *Bheeshanaya* era, left me struggling to find the appropriate words to describe to a trusted relative the mere remnants of torture that I had witnessed. The sheer enormity of what I had seen, added to the feeling that someone who had not been there with me would not be able to comprehend its significance or magnitude, contributed to the difficulty I faced in verbalising my experience. If I was finding it a challenge to articulate what I had seen, having merely witnessed the remnants of torture some twenty years after the *Bheeshanaya*, I found myself wondering how those who directly endured its reality in places such as this could possibly communicate their experiences of violence.

While I did not come across 'hysteria' when gathering stories of torture (possibly due to the time lapse between the event and this research), there was undoubtedly an emotional intensity to the mediation of these memories. Many torture survivors I spoke to appeared to have trouble verbally communicating their experiences of torture. A typical response I came across was, "I don't have the words for these things. I can't say it (*kiyanna bä*)", as said by Rahula, an ex-insurgent who had spent just over a year as a teenager in a 'detention centre'. Many of the torture stories I was told followed a similar pattern. They would usually involve a detailed account of the process of being captured and taken to a 'detention centre'. This would be followed by hesitation, verbal gaps, and an apparent struggle on the part of the narrator to articulate himself when it came to 'sharing' the experience of being subjected to torture. The narrative would then jump to the next stage and pick up pace, where rich descriptions of life in rehabilitation centres (for those who were moved on from 'detention centres') and their return home, followed.

The relationship between pain and its expression has been the subject of recent debate among scholars specialising in the anthropology of violence. Scarry (1985 and 2004) argues that pain actively destroys language. This resistance to language brings about "an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (Scarry 1985: 4). With reference to the torture of Tamil detainees by the Sri Lankan security forces in the 1980s, Daniel (1996) points to the speechlessness and incommunicability that torture invokes. The

apparent struggles that many of my research participants seemed to experience in recounting their memories of torture would suggest on the surface that such arguments would seamlessly apply to the context of the *Bheeshanaya*. Indeed, Perera has appropriated such contentions in his study of female survivors of the *Bheeshanaya*. He states that complete documentation of the experience of terror can never be fully achieved because there will always be “gaps in terms of experience, perception, and the nature of pain itself” (2001: 159).

That memories of torture were difficult to express verbally was found in my research, particularly in the case of torture survivors. The sheer psychological weight of such painful memories, the affective magnitude of its personal experience, and the ethically and politically charged nature of the subject itself played a significant role in complicating its expression. Indeed this very incommunicability of violence puts it at risk of being blotted from social memory (see Green 1999), and scholars have suggested that for ‘victims’ of violence this renders a double-edged form of suffering, both in terms of the actual violent act and in its inexpressibility and un-shareability (Donnan and Simpson 2007). However, torture survivors are not a homogeneous group, and not everyone I spoke to found their violent experiences incommunicable. In other words, while many of my research participants found pain difficult to express verbally, it was not entirely inexpressible or completely un-shareable. Furthermore, what was striking about the process of collecting narratives of torture was the apparent eagerness of torture survivors to share their experiences and the efforts they made to render their recollections in some way intelligible. Where words were unavailing, people creatively utilised alternative means to articulate their memories of torture. This took various forms, from expressive body-language, to the adoption of sarcasm, and it even involved the use of creative and visual means of communication. Let us first look at the ways in which torture survivors of the *Bheeshanaya* gave ‘voice’ to their experiences of violence, before going on to consider some of their motivations to do so.

Alternative Forms of Expressing Violence

The testimony of my research participants took the form of a mishmash of words and gestures, of saying and showing (see Das 2007). Often, their words were interspersed with expressive body language, and their stories were thick with emotion.

The majority of torture survivors I interviewed appeared to consider their bodies a repository for violent memories and a locus of evidence. They drew on their bodies to facilitate the articulation of their violent experiences and to mediate traumatic memories. Often torture survivors would point to their bodily scars as “tangible signs of evidence” (Fassin and D’Halluin 2005: 598) of the torture they had experienced, in the process of recounting their stories. This would be accompanied by a brief and stilted commentary on each scar (e.g., “this is the scar of a cigarette butt”, “this is the scar of a PVC pipe filled with sand”). Some others contorted their bodies in various ways, in an effort to show me how they were hung or confined during their detention.

Scholars have highlighted the use of the body as a site of power and truth. In the case of survivors of the Partition in India, Das (2007) suggests that women’s bodies were containers of poisonous knowledge - of violence and betrayal, thereby highlighting the link between violence and the body. Similarly, in the immediate aftermath of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in Delhi, she goes on to illustrate the ways in which women used their bodies as evidence of their loss and the violence done to them (2007 and 1990b). On a similar note, Fassin and D’Halluin (2005) argue, in the context of people seeking asylum and the increasing emphasis placed on medical certificates by French authorities, that for the marginalised and poor, the body becomes the place that produces and displays evidence of truth. In the face of an overpowering official narrative of denial and suffocating silence, many who had been tortured during the *Bheeshanaya* drew on the body as an affirmation of their ‘counter-truth’ and a witness to the suffering they had been subjected to by the state. As well as supporting the narrativisation of their traumatic memories, the body was further drawn on to lend a sense of credibility to their stories.

The paradox of modern ‘clean’ torture, which is said to leave no bodily scars, did not apply in the case of the torture survivors I interviewed (see Fassin and D’Halluin 2005, Rejali 2007). The majority of my research participants had visible bodily scars to show me, although there were some marks that had faded somewhat with time. Daniel’s (1996) experience with former Tamil detainees in Sri Lanka was different to mine. He was unable to see the scars that his research participants so enthusiastically showed him. Referring to the attempts of one torture survivor, Benedict, to show him scars on his wrists from rope handcuffs and cigarette burns, Daniel states, “I could not tell the difference; he saw them very clearly”. Benedict then goes on to show Daniel the scars of beatings and further burn marks on his feet. Daniel simply says, “I could not see these, either” (1996: 140). He rationalises that

this may have been down to the wounds having healed, his feet not scarring, or that “he was never tortured but merely claims that he was” (1996: 140). I am moved to agree with De Silva (2005) who, as mentioned earlier, has argued that the mass-scale practice of torture and accompanying impunity during the *Bheeshanaya* prevented it from being kept ‘clean’. In addition to the overall chaos and confusion of the *Bheeshanaya*, I got the distinct impression from some former counter-insurrectionary officers (and some survivors of torture), that there was little interest shown by the international community in the human rights abuses perpetrated by the state against the Sinhala community during the *Bheeshanaya*. This perceived lack of scrutiny from the international community and the diminished likelihood of legal reprisals it entailed may have contributed to the ‘clumsy’ infliction of torture by state actors who did not bother to avoid hiding the evidence of the violence they inflicted.

Levi draws on the tattooing of registration numbers on the arms of prisoners by Nazis in Auschwitz to illustrate the symbolic meaning behind the infliction of such indelible bodily scars by torturers on their victims. He points out that these marks stated: “you will never leave here; this is the mark with which slaves are branded and cattle sent to slaughter, and that is what you have become” (1988: 95). The deliberate infliction of bodily scars here then carried powerful symbolic connotations of power, identity, and memory. In light of Levi’s reflections, we may consider that the torture scars former insurgents so eagerly showed me were an embodiment of their memories of degradation and suffering, and a tangible legacy of the violent power exerted over them by their torturers. By actively drawing on their scars to reconstruct their violent pasts, former torture ‘victims’ attempted to politically re-occupy these marks of power in ways that reversed the power-structure between themselves and their ‘torturers’. These scars further lent authenticity to their subject position as ‘victims’ of violence, and lent former insurgent survivors of torture moral credence.

Levi pensively goes on to reflect on his own tattoo from Auschwitz:

At a distance of forty years, my tattoo has become a part of my body. I don’t glory in it, nor am I ashamed of it, I do not display and do not hide it. I show it unwillingly to those who ask out of pure curiosity; readily, and with anger, to those who say they are incredulous. Often young people ask me why I don’t have it erased, and this surprises me: why should I? There are not many of us in the world to bear this witness. (Levi 1986: 95)

Levi here shows the capacity of bodily marks to function as witness to violence and as an embodiment of its memory. This powerfully resonates with the ways in which those who survived the torture of the *Bheeshanaya* used their scars as evidence of a violence personally endured but officially denied.

Where language faltered in the face of violence (Das 2007), alternative means through which to communicate their experiences were drawn on by survivors of torture. One ex-insurgent, Nikhil, frustrated at his inability to describe what went on between him and his torturers, suddenly grabbed my note-book and pen. He went on to patiently sketch his own experience of torture. His facial expression was one of serious concentration – almost as though he wanted the sketch to be perfect. He handed back to me a drawing of a man (himself) strung-up on a pole by his hands and feet, like a pig roasting on a spit-fire, and told me: “They called this the *Dhammacakra* (Buddhist wheel of life symbolising the Buddha’s teachings)...we were turned around and around and beaten at every turn”.³³ Prema, an ex-insurgent and farmer, who continues to be a keen JVP activist, further resorted to sarcasm to fill the gap that disrupted his narrative. His only bitter words on his time in detention were “let’s just say that they treated us well in there (*apiṭa hondaṭa sāḷakuva*)”.

Where violence suppresses the capacity of speech, people draw on alternative means to give violent memories a voice. However, torture survivors are diverse human beings and while I did find that many struggled to express their experiences of torture verbally, some people seemed content to speak of their violent pasts with relative ease and in detail, albeit with some obvious and inescapable interruptions attached to recalling traumatic memories. Where there were verbal gaps, these were augmented by other forms of expression.

Nevertheless, it is also important to note, that people’s narratives of torture did not mean that they ‘shared’ their experiences of it with me in any real sense, or that I (or any researcher for that matter) could truly understand what it felt like. Scarry argues that this remoteness and un-shareability of pain is due to the “absolute split” (2005: 365) that physical pain brings about between one’s own reality and the reality of other persons. While I make no claims of having really ‘felt’ the pain of the torture

³³ The use of this specific method of torture ironically referred to as the *Dhammacakra* (the wheel of life symbolising the Buddha’s teachings) during the Terror has been documented in other literature on this topic (see Perera 1999, Amnesty International 1991).

survivors who shared their stories with me, being first and foremost a human being, and a researcher second, meant that I was able to empathise and further to believe their stories, acknowledging the suffering and injustice they had been subjected to.

Daniel notes the sheer lack of passion and “utter listlessness” in the manner in which stories of torture were recounted to him by estate Tamil torture survivors in Sri Lanka, which he puts down to the un-shareability and highly individuated nature of its experience (1996: 143). Scarry similarly likens the narration of torture to a mere sketch, “the experience it describes is utterly clear in its outline but all the emotional edges have been eliminated” (1985: 32). While not being quite the “flat-toned recitations devoid of conviction” (Daniel 1996: 143) that Daniel found, I too came across a few victims of torture who appeared to exercise restraint over their emotions in the narrativisation of torture. However, they were in the minority. Indeed what I found particularly challenging about listening to stories of torture (compared to stories that focussed on other subjects) for the purposes of this research, was the weight of emotion in the telling. Torture narratives were punctuated with stifled sobs, distressed pauses, and outright weeping. Moving these previously unspoken and painful memories from the private realm of silence and forgetting to the public realm of telling necessitated bearing witness to one’s own distressing past (see Jackson 2002).

This open display of emotion in the expression of memory was further influenced by my own positioning as researcher and listener. My gender, the trust that I developed with research participants, along with their perception of me as an ‘insider-outsider’ who offered a safe amount of distance but also retained a semblance of familiarity, contributed to creating a narrative space conducive to emotional expression in retelling. These emotions overall served to make their experience of torture more ‘shareable’ in a sense, particularly at points where words appeared futile. I am not suggesting that the torture survivors I spoke to consciously manipulated emotion to embellish their narratives. Nevertheless, the emotional expression of torture narratives functioned as an affirmation of truth, made the experience of torture more ‘shareable’, and lent a sense of moral credibility to the ‘counter-truth’ that torture survivors communicated. By allowing their stories to be saturated with emotion, torture survivors added a private and personal edge to them, which in turn affirmed these memories to belong to them and gave former insurgents ownership of their stories. For survivors of torture then, emotion in narrative functioned as an empowering mechanism, which eased the transition of violent memories from the

private realm of silence and ‘forgetting’ into the public realm of talking and remembering.

Pushing Memories of Torture Out of the Shadows of Silence and Forgetting

In the face of fear, trauma, and silence, why did research participants who had survived torture go to such lengths to ‘share’ their violent experiences with me? One important reason was the desire to have someone bear witness to their testimony. What many survivors sought from their narrative expressions was for the outside world to bear witness to their alternative ‘truth’, and importantly to have people believe them. In the context of violence, “telling the truth” can legitimise an end to silence as it provides a righteous and just purpose for storytelling (Donnan and Simpson 2007: 17). This appeared to be particularly important in the face of an official narrative of silence and denial on the perpetration of torture by the state, which was perceived by former insurgents as drowning out their ‘truth’.

This alternative narrative carried a strong moral undercurrent. It laid an emphasis on the ‘innocence’ of former insurgents by deflecting the focus from insurrectionary violence to torture perpetrated by the state. Their subject position as ‘victims’ of violence and injustice further offered moral purchase over former insurgents’ unsettling memories of the *Bheeshanaya*, which made easier its expression. As Scarry has argued, “it is difficult to think of a human situation in which the lines of moral responsibility are more starkly or simply drawn, in which there is a more compelling reason to ally one’s sympathies with the one person and to repel the claims of the other” (1985: 35).

The majority of people I spoke to believed that their suffering during the *Bheeshanaya* had been disregarded, and this perception contributed to torture survivors’ desires to put forward an alternative history of the *Bheeshanaya*. Many torture survivors told me that the violence they were forced to endure during the Terror was ignored and ‘forgotten’. They drew comparisons with the attention paid by the international community to the plight of suspected Tamil militants tortured by the state, to illustrate their point. They assured me that they did not wish to depreciate the suffering endured by Tamils, but that they wished to emphasise the extent to which their own, had been marginalised.

This view is evident in an excerpt from my interview with Nikhil, a former insurgent who was detained and tortured for over a year by the state security forces. He was held in isolation in a cramped cell for the first 6 months of his detention, following which he was moved to another larger cell, which he shared with a member of the Tamil Tigers. The two detainees developed a strong bond of friendship during their incarceration, which lasted long after their release.

The Red Cross came in one day. They said [puts on American accent and speaks in English] “hello there, we are from the Red Cross. We are here to help you. What organisations are you from?” [switches back to Sinhala] In our broken (rudimentary) English we (his LTTE cell-mate and himself) managed to tell them that we were from the LTTE and the JVP. When I said that I was from the JVP they looked frightened and stepped back. They thought ‘OK, we’ll leave him alone. He is dangerous (*darunu*). He’s of no interest to us’. They took the LTTE guy out, and left me behind in the cell [long pause, gets upset, tries to repress tears, takes a drag of his cigarette]. They spoke to the CSU (Counter-subversive Unit) on behalf of the LTTE guy, and he was released. No one cared about me. The LTTE guy visited me after that and we stayed in touch. When we discussed this he privately told me that he then realised that us Sinhala rural boys (*gambada kollo*) were even worse off than they were... This is something I saw with my own eyes. Something that happened to me [looks visibly upset. His eyes fill up. He runs his hands over his face, takes a long drag from his cigarette]. We had no one to support us.

Torture as a Collective Experience

Daniel (1996) contends that the “excruciating particularity” of pain and its absolute “privatisation” renders torture unbelievable. His argument is a furtherance of Scarry’s claim that pain’s certainty and its very present and individual nature, throws doubt on the pain of another (Scarry 1985: 7). Indeed Daniel goes as far as arguing that this “hyper-individuation” of pain even leads victims of torture to deny the pain of others who have undergone similar experiences. With reference to Tamil survivors of torture in Sri Lanka he states, “I encountered time and time again torture victims who had been subjected to the same tortures by the same torturers in the same camps and jails, and even at the same time, and who – when finally they were capable of

speaking about their experiences – denied that their fellow inmates were tortured and accused them of lying” (Daniel 1996: 143).

The findings of my own research diverge significantly from this position. Without exception, those former insurgents who were tortured during the *Bheeshanaya*, framed their stories in terms of the collective experience of torture, while maintaining at the same time a personal resonance to them (e.g., through emotional telling). In other words, my research participants’ experiences of torture were indeed individual and personal, but were not exclusively “individualised” to the extent that the torture and suffering of others was denied. In fact, I found the opposite of this to be true, with every survivor of torture I spoke to unfailingly placing their own experience within the context of the torture and suffering of others. Some people even seemed to find it easier to talk about the torture of others than they did to talk about their own experiences of violence. In one sense, the torture and suffering of others provided (for some people) a protective narrative guise under which they could candidly talk about their own traumatic experiences. Comparing one’s own pain with that of others allowed some people to gain a perspective on, and comprehend, their own experience of torture. In other words, portraying the suffering of another as being worse than their own appeared to provide torture survivors with a means of coping with their discomfiting memories in the aftermath. Consider, for example, the narrative extract of an ex-insurgent below, who went as far as saying:

I wasn’t tortured. Not like the others around me. I was just hung and beaten for a few days. They tortured others in the camp...They would put barbed wire in a PVC pipe and insert it up them. Then they would take the pipe out and leave the barbed wire inside. What suffering!

Talking about the torture and suffering of others also enabled people to carve out a space to engage in a moral critique of state violence and to express their abhorrence of torture. Former insurgents frequently expressed disgust at women being meted out torture in equal measure to men, when Sinhala (mainly rural) culture sets out clear boundaries between men and women, generally considering the latter to be the ‘gentler sex’. Their aversion was expressed at a form of violence utilised by the state that defiled core cultural values of their shared Sinhala communities. Shehan, an ex-

insurgent who spent several months being tortured in a public utility building that had been temporarily converted into a 'detention centre', told me with a clear expression of disbelief mixed with disgust: "You know, they tortured the girls just like the boys. They didn't make any difference because they were girls. They were also hung and beaten. They did terrible things to them. Things that it is not right (appropriate) for me to tell you about". Shehan here implies the sexual violation of suspected female insurgents, as affirmed by a few other former detainees who told me that women held in torture chambers were subjected to additional forms of violence entailing sexual assault and rape. The shame surrounding this and fear of its repetition, goes some way towards explaining the refusal of female ex-insurgents to participate in this research.

Friendship in Situations of Extreme Violence

Some survivors of torture, such as Tilak below, provided detailed and candid descriptions of their time in detention. Tilak is a farmer and continues to support the JVP. He told me that he spent over 5 years in various 'detention centres' for his involvement in insurrectionary violence. A murder charge levelled against him that he denied to me, explains his unusually lengthy detention. His denial of murder runs contrary to what I was told by the person who introduced us to each other. We will never know for certain whether Tilak really did perpetrate murder, but his denial raises questions about the appropriation of moral responsibility for violence and highlights the fuzziness of 'perpetrator' and 'victim' categories. An extract of Tilak's narrative is below.

They did all that they could (possibly) do to me. They ironed me with a hot iron, they inserted S-lon (PVC) pipes up me, they cut me with blades here (shows scars across his chest and shoulders), they electrocuted me, and they hung me and beat me. I didn't have a single fingernail or toenail remaining. They did it to get information from me. I knew death then. I thought I would die. I tried as hard as I could not to give information. Then it got to the stage where I could no longer bear it. I got self strength/confidence (*aathma shakthiya*) from another JVP prisoner held there called Nilanga, who was from a village near mine. He suffered a great deal (*hungak duk vinda*). He was tortured in every possible manner and they even threw petrol on him and set him alight. But he never said anything. He knew he was going to die. He always told me 'don't tell them

(*ung*)³⁴ a single thing'. He fought right to the end. Even when he was bruised and bleeding he fought back in whatever way he could – he'd manage to muster the energy to spit and hit out at them (torturers). In his last days I hand-fed him. He couldn't lift his limbs – he was swollen all over and had no life in his body (*pana nā*). Then they brought him near my village, shot him, and set him on tyres to burn. He told me not to tell them anything, and I gained significant mental/emotional strength from him (*hitāṭa dhaivayak gattē eyāgen*). Seven of us were taken in the same vehicle with Nilanga. We saw them take him out of the vehicle and kill him.

Tilak's narrative describes the torture and suffering of another as being worse than his own, while at the same time placing his own experience of torture in focus. Making comparisons between his suffering and that of another appears to have provided him with an important means of comprehending and coming to terms with his violent past. In illustrating torture to be a shared experience, Tilak switches the moral focus from culpability to that of collective suffering and victimhood (see Young 1995). In an important sense, this collective narrative frame makes possible the 'sharing' of his traumatic story.

Out of his entire experience as an insurgent during the *Bheeshanaya*, Tilak chose to centre his narrative on his experience of being tortured at the hands of the state (he avoided entirely talking about his own complicity in violence). In remembering his experiences of violence during the *Bheeshanaya* primarily in terms of victimhood, Tilak's memories of the self are reworked in moral terms and serve to avoid acknowledging responsibility for the perpetration of violence. In remembering his experiences of the *Bheeshanaya* from an ethical perspective, Tilak finds ways of living with himself and his past in the present.

Tilak's narrative further conveys a sense of collective identity and camaraderie forged between people sharing the experience of torture. It gives us an understanding of the kinds of human relationships formed in situations of extreme violence and emphasises their importance as a mechanism for coping with torture. Throughout his story Tilak communicates values of friendship and loyalty. In his story, the friendship between two young men brought together under shared circumstances of terror, pain, and suffering, gives Tilak the psychological resilience to endure torture. In dehumanising conditions these 'intimate' social relationships appear to have provided

³⁴ *Ung* which translates as 'they' is a derogatory term used generally to refer to non-human beings, such as animals.

those being tortured with a comforting sense of being human. Through it, those who survived torture ascribed its experience with an important sense of meaning.

Tilak tells us that despite the torturer's repeated efforts to break his will through various means, his friend beseeches him to not divulge anything. This suggests recognition on his part, of the importance that torturers attach to their questions. Scarry (1985, 2004) throws doubt over the professed importance given to the question by those who perpetrate torture, as being its aim. She goes on to theorise that interrogation is internal to the structure of torture, and that pain and interrogation are connected but conflicting experiences for the torturer and tortured. The question is so urgent and matters so much to the torturer, that she or he will inflict "brutality" on the victim, and the feigned urgency of the question neutralises the moral consideration of inflicting pain. To the victim, the question is of such little importance and urgency, that he will generally answer it (Scarry 2005: 376). Tilak says: "they did it to get information from me". This recognition of the value attached to the question by torturers, in turn makes it an important tool of agency and a means through which the balance of power between the torturer and the tortured can be redressed.

According to Tilak's story, instead of answering the question, the victims fight to withhold it despite the agony they are subjected to. The perception of how vital the question is to the torturer, in turn leads to importance being attached to the answer by the victim. This results in him withholding it from the torturer. Tilak even shows this to be accompanied by acts of 'rebellion' such as spitting and hitting out at torturers. Tilak represents an image of courage and defiance in a situation where agency is apparently impossible. The sense of impotence felt in being forced to helplessly watch his friend being tortured and ultimately murdered is evident in his narrative. Through the memory work he engages in, Tilak imbues his past with a sense of agency, which enables a retrospective redressing of the skewed balance of power between victims and their torturers. In doing so he attempts to alter his relationship to the past in order to continue living with its memory in the present. This is in congruence with Jackson's contention that "to reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them" (2002: 15).

Through his story Tilak engages in a reconstruction of selfhood, which represents himself (and his friend) not only in empowering terms, but also in moral terms. Tilak is keen to emphasise that he and his friend refused to co-operate with torturers and to answer their questions. According to Tilak, and most other former detainees I spoke to, these questions were primarily centred on denouncing others

engaged in insurgent activity. We cannot know for sure whether Tilak and his friends did manage to withhold answering their torturers' questions. What is of significance here is that Tilak remembers himself (and his friend) as having held on to their moral values by refusing to betray others in the face of torture. Interestingly, the large majority of former detainees I spoke to explained that many victims of torture, unable to endure the pain inflicted on them, ultimately denounced their peers to state interrogators, but all those who participated in this research (much like Tilak) denied having done so themselves. This reflects an awareness of the particular moral aversion that 'traitors' attract (see Kelly and Thiranagama N.d., Scarry 2004). In his retelling of the past, Tilak disassociates himself (and his friend) from this reprehensible category, and emphasises their moral integrity even under the most debilitating circumstances.

Scarry (1985) states that those who have not been through prolonged terror and coercive methods imagine that under such circumstances they themselves would show greater courage than those who survive torture. She points to the debates that raged in the aftermath of the Holocaust about the complicity and passivity of Jews as examples of this. Quoting historian Lucy Dawidowicz, she rightly argues that "complicity" and "co-operation" have altered meanings in situations of captivity, as they are terms that generally apply to freedom of choice (Scarry 2004: 368). The narratives of former detainees that run through this chapter demonstrate that being confined within the walls of terror and pain, cut off from the outside world, results in detainees naturally being consumed by the immediacy of violence and the intense desire to survive. In an abnormal environment where moral worlds are turned upside down and people's choices are restrained by excruciatingly limiting conditions, we can safely say that such notions of ethically informed choice are made redundant on the ground. In his study of the narratives belonging to survivors of the Holocaust, Langer vividly demonstrates how moral distinctions crumble in the face of subjugation to extreme violence, as people strive simply to survive. He argues that moral systems are reduced to "an irrelevant luxury", in the absence of choice and responsibility for the consequences of choice (1991: 122).

Influenced by the popular moral judgement passed on denouncers post-terror, and undoubtedly by his own retrospective ethical sensibility, Tilak's story represents his own actions and that of his friend (memorialised in his narrative) as upholding core normative moral values. Through his reconstruction of the past, Tilak appears to be composing a semblance of personal dignity in a situation of debilitating

disempowerment where his torturers stripped him of it. By remembering his violent experiences in terms of agency and moral integrity under the most arduous and disempowering circumstances then, Tilak gives meaning to his traumatic past and makes its memory more tolerable to live with in the post-terror present. This attests to Jackson's compelling argument that telling stories allows people to re-empower themselves and put right apparent injustices or imbalances (2002: 15).

Lalin is an ex-insurgent who was detained for over a year in a torture chamber housed in privately owned business premises. Like Tilak, he imbues the experience of torture with meaning:

I had many awful experiences there... From morning 'til night we were blindfolded – for a whole year I was blindfolded... I was tortured, and saw and heard others being tortured and killed. I knew how people died in there. I could hear. When it went quiet for a bit I would cautiously (*parissameng*) slightly raise my blindfold and look around. I then saw the dead bodies, tortured people. I knew how it was in there. There was nothing I could do but paste myself against the wall [starts to get upset, pauses]. One of my friends in there knew that he was going to die. He told me where his family lived. He told me to pass on a message to his wife and to tell her what happened to him if I ever got out. But I didn't get out for a long time, and feel sorry that I couldn't meet his wishes, because he told me his address and his message orally. I had forgotten by the time I came out. Anyway, I was taken up by my own problems in there. I saw him being tortured and killed. They made him drink his own urine and beat him.

Lalin earnestly wants me to believe his story and is keen to show that despite him not having directly 'seen' other people being tortured, he experienced it through his senses - he heard the suffering of others and saw the remnants of their torture. However, Lalin does go on to state later that he also "saw" his friend being tortured and ultimately murdered. Blindfolding detainees was common practice during the *Bheeshanaya*, which served to heighten the sense of terror. It was further undoubtedly used by the state to reduce the likelihood of legal repercussions in the future and to support an official narrative of denial. At various points during the interview Lalin took pains to show me bodily scars to substantiate his story. While Tilak's narrative entailed defiance and agency in the face of torture, Lalin remembers fear and a hopeless sense of disempowerment. His comment about not being able to do anything

but cower against the wall gives us a sense of the powerlessness that torture victims felt, and their intense preoccupation with survival. It brings to mind Levi's work on Jewish prisoners in Auschwitz, which similarly showed how they "instinctively sought refuge in corners" to protect themselves from violence (1988: 75).

Lalin emphasises that friendships with others suffering a similar fate were made, and important, in conditions of extreme violence. His experience of torture was made meaningful by the social relationships it entailed. Torture then was not simply a senseless or meaningless experience that severed the victim entirely from others and social worlds, as suggested by some scholars (see Scarry 1985, Daniel 1996). Nevertheless, Lalin intimates that the normative values underlying friendship are rendered impotent under the debilitating constraints of violence and detention. The overwhelmingly present and immediate nature of torture (Scarry 1985) and the critical focus on survival of the self, leaves torture victims unable to meet the normative obligations underlying social relationships (such as promises to friends), in the same way that they would do in 'normal' everyday life outside the realm of torture. Through his story, Lalin suggests that while social relationships gave meaning to the experience of torture, these convoluted relationships were subjected to 'abnormal' and oppressive constraints in situations of extreme violence. Torture is thereby shown to have a damaging effect on the normative moral values that underpin 'intimate' relationships.

Talking about Death and Survival

The feeling of being close to death or 'knowing death' was an aspect of the experience of torture that was emphasised unfailingly across all the narratives I gathered from survivors. This sense of being 'so close to death as to be able to smell it' so to speak, was portrayed as the catalyst for a range of other emotions, which made the experience of detention so unbearable. These included a heightened sense of anxiety, fear, uncertainty, hopelessness, isolation, and debilitating depression. Some survivors of torture remembered the sharp awareness of the vulnerability of one's own life that it brought on, to have been a turning point in enduring the experience of torture. We saw earlier how Tilak showed his friend Nilanaga's sense of imminent death to bring about an urge to leave behind a legacy of defiance and agency, while for Lalin's friend, knowing that death was close brought a desire to establish a

connection with his family. Many survivors of torture further represented death as going hand-in-hand with survival, and stressed it to be a key factor in motivating them to get through its experience. They explained that ‘survival’ was a personal strategy, which involved gathering and sustaining emotional and psychological strength to endure the experience of torture, in the face of efforts by torturers to break down these personal resources. So, where the reality of torture rendered one physically powerless to resist it, people laid significance on agency and on garnering psychological and emotional resources to survive torture, in their memories. This notion was commonly referred to as *mānasika shaktiya*, which may be understood as psychological and emotional strength.

Let us now consider the story of Randhir, a former insurgent, who came across as having a positive outlook on life. He told me that his experience of torture brought him face-to-face with the human reality of death, which in turn made him reflect on what a waste his death in detention would be. The result of this, according to him, was a reinvigorated thirst for life and renewed aspirations for the future, which helped him garner the psychological resources to survive torture.

The police kept me in the station for three months in a police- cage (cell). They beat me for two days. But I realised that it was not as bad as the beatings the others got. I could tell from the extent of their wounds. I was terrified. I felt death. Life wasn't certain, nothing was certain. My main problem was my sadness at what a waste (*aparāde*) my death would be. There was so much I wanted to achieve and what a waste of a life this would be if I was killed in here. I wanted to get a University education, I wanted to be a film-maker. It was my aspiration/hope (*balāporottuva*) that made me live. You have to make your own mental state in there. When they took me out of the cage after three months I was like a King- coconut (*tambili geḍiya*) – like this [he scrunches up his body] my skin was orange (pale). I hadn't had any sunlight. There were huge problems of overcrowding and sanitation in there. We didn't have a separate toilet but had to defecate in the cage, and there were about 20 of us in it - in this tiny space [he gestures space with his hands]. At night we slept with great difficulty. We had to sleep on our sides, pasted to each other – there wasn't enough room to lie flat. If we wanted to turn over in the middle of the night, we had to ask the person next to us whether we could. Lots of people got various diseases in there.

Randhir's narrative adds a little more clarity to the blurred picture that we have pieced together so far of day-to-day life in 'detention centres'. Randhir's comparison of his suffering to that of others, and the under-estimation of his own, echoes the narratives of other torture survivors. It further represents torture to be a shared experience, while maintaining its personal and individual character, which was a feature common to torture narratives. Randhir remembers fear, depression, and uncertainty as being emotions that spiral from the sense of proximity to death. Uncertainty in particular is shown to be a key feature of the experience of torture, which was reiterated by all the former victims of torture I spoke to. Randhir says, "life wasn't certain, nothing was certain", which conveys that violence adds to uncertainty. Randhir's narrative represents the sense of impending death engendered by torture, as being the turning point in his experience of it. He remembers it as an agentative moment and through it understands his survival and appropriates meaning to his discomforting past in the aftermath of terror.

While Randhir remembered torture, and the fear of death it invoked as having spawned empowering reflections on life and aspirations for the future, other victims of torture I spoke to remembered its experience to be so immediate and present as to relinquish all thoughts of the future (Scarry 1985, Daniel 1996). In such circumstances, with imminent death hanging over the victim, survival becomes a preoccupation. Lalin, the ex-insurgent we met earlier in this chapter, went on to tell me that during his time in detention:

You couldn't think about the future, or about ambitions in life. I didn't have the ability to mentally focus on that. Because I had to think about how I could stay alive. There was no time or room for aspirations...It was simply my private, isolating sense of pain (*tani pudgalika vēdanāva*).

Interestingly and somewhat surprisingly, a small number of torture victims I spoke to remembered individual counter-insurrectionary officers through their stories and understood their survival of violence through these 'torturers'. Individual counter-insurrectionary officers' names were remembered (despite the time-lapse) and quoted directly in survivors' narratives, some of which literally portrayed them as 'saviours'. For instance, Kirihami, who spent many months in a detention centre being hung by his fingers and beaten mercilessly, went on to tell me, "We thought we would die (in

the detention centre). Even today I feel that Major Mahinda helped us greatly. He saved us”. Major Mahinda was the Commanding Officer of the infamous torture chamber in which Kirihami was detained. I was led to understand that he did not ‘dirty his hands’ by directly perpetrating torture himself. He appears instead to have delegated it to soldiers further down the hierarchy. Major Mahinda’s ‘tough love’ approach seemed to have won him favour with Kirihami in his retrospective memory of torture:

Major Mahinda told us to stay out of trouble and to not get involved in these kinds of things (insurgent activity). That gave us great mental strength. He educated us. And through our beatings in the camp, and the advice he gave us in the camp, and the advice he gave our families, we felt that our mental strength (*mānasika shaktiya*) and understanding (*avabōdaya*) improved greatly.

Kirihami’s story is of particular interest because it gives us a glimpse into the shadowy figure of the counter-insurrectionary officer and into the lives of those who ran such ‘detention centres’. It suggests that the experience of torture was grounded in convoluted social relationships not only between ‘victims’ themselves, but also between ‘torturers’ and their ‘victims’. Moreover, it demonstrates that many torture ‘victims’ did not tend to remember or represent ‘torturers’ in stereotypical or generalised terms, but that they were careful to recognise differences between individual ‘torturers’. In Kirihami’s retrospective portrayal of his ‘torturer’ as a ‘saviour’, who had Kirihami’s best interests at heart, he appears to be finding ways of understanding his traumatic experiences. To remember this significant and life-altering experience as meaningless or senseless would render it intolerable to live with in the aftermath of terror.

Kinship and Community Ties

Family and community were afforded a prominent position in narratives of torture belonging to survivors. They were shown to be a vital form of emotional support and to offer an important lifeline of hope to tortured detainees, thereby

intensifying the meaning ascribed to the experience of torture. The attention paid to the suffering of kin and communities in people's stories represents torture as a shared experience with far reaching and devastating implications for people's 'intimate' social worlds. This was another means through which torture survivors engaged in a veiled moral critique of state violence and illustrated its disregard for normative values that underpinned 'intimate' Sinhala Buddhist communities. People remembered kinship and community ties as having withstood the pressures of state terror. In this sense, these narratives may be read as empowering, because they emphasise the strength and defiance of kinship and community ties in the face of the violence.

Shehan, a former insurgent who was detained and tortured by the state security forces, told me that he pinned his hopes for survival on his uncle who was also a member of the security forces (but not based at the detention centre in which Shehan was being held):

My family didn't even know where I was. They had many problems and were unable to find me. Many people in my village, including my sister, had died of dengue. But one day my uncle who was in the army had managed to find out where I was. He came into my camp. They (torturers) didn't allow him to speak to me. I was sitting against the wall, blindfolded, and chained. But I heard his voice. He called out *putā* (son) and then he tapped me on the shoulder from behind [pauses, stifles a sob]. That gave me mental strength [starts getting upset, stares at feet, struggles to talk]. Here – look, I had wounds all over my legs from the chains [shows me scars on his legs]. My uncle spoke to the other soldiers in the camp (detention centre) and told them to make sure I didn't die. They said that they wouldn't kill me and that they planned to hand me over to the police. So there was some future left for me.

Shehan's story emphasises the important role that family and kin played in the lives of those who were tortured during the Terror, particularly in terms of offering them hope and protection. He remembers his experience of torture as being rooted in kinship.

During the Terror, particularly at the onset of the state counter-insurrection, the priority for most parents was to secure the safety and survival of their children through the Terror. In addition to sending young men and women away from their communities and into hiding, many families also believed that preventing youth from

interacting with the JVP in the first instance would insure their survival. Kirihami, whose story we heard earlier, proceeded to tell me how his cousins had forcibly locked him in their house for days on end, when they found out about his involvement with the JVP. He said that his cousins were “trying to get me to stay out of trouble. I respect them for that even today”. Kirihami’s cousins however, were unable to prevent him from being taken into detention and tortured. Upon being released from detention, Kirihami was handed back to the care of his family by Major Mahinda (the Commanding Officer of his detention centre), who advised his family to keep him out of trouble (involvement with the JVP). Kirihami goes on to stress the practical supportive role that family played in the immediate aftermath of torture. He told me that when he and a friend were handed back to their families:

Our families gave us medical care, because we were swollen-up and had so many injuries. They gave us various Ayurvedic medicines (indigenous herbal medicine)...we were (now) subjected to the control of our families. They controlled us in a very strict manner (*tadin pālanaya keruvā*). They didn’t allow us to go out of the house. So we couldn’t go and do JVP again.

This led Kirihami to gradually distance himself from the JVP and ultimately cut off contact with the movement. In Kirihami’s case then, his family is credited with having taken on the significant responsibility of securing his ultimate survival.

Kirihami’s story, like that of Shehan, shows the effects of torture to be shared, as pain and suffering was inflicted on families and entire communities. In addition to the psychological and emotional pain inflicted on the kin of detainees, family members of those detained were further faced with severe economic constraints. Perera’s work on the female relatives of people disappeared during the *Bheeshanaya* in its aftermath gives us an idea of the kinds of economic and social pressures that the wives of suspected insurgents were forced to endure (see Perera 1998). Moreover, in the environment of terror, confusion, and impunity that prevailed, families often simply did not know what had happened to their loved ones following their abduction or arrest – whether they had been killed or whether they were being held in one of the numerous ‘detention centres’ dotted around the country. On top of their economic

woes, the onus fell on families themselves to investigate the whereabouts of their loved ones.

Consider once again the case of Kirihami. His story demonstrates the burden put on the families of those ‘disappeared’ into detention. He emphasises the activation of village and community networks in the process of investigating the whereabouts of the ‘disappeared’, as families relied on friends and neighbours for leads to the fate of their loved ones. Uncertainty, fear, and urgency of the present, affected not only those being tortured in detention, but also that of their families on the outside.

My father was in hospital. He was ill because of the trouble I was in. At that time whenever villagers (*gamē minissu*) saw a corpse floating in the sea or in the river, or if they saw a body set alight on the road, they would come rushing and tell my family that it was me. I think they honestly thought that it may have been me. So my poor parents would be running in a panic back and forth to all these places like mad people (*pissu minissu*).

Kirihami’s father subsequently died of a heart attack, which Kirihami puts down to the stress brought on by his detention. Interestingly, other research participants also told me of parental deaths during their time in detention or soon after, which they believed to have been brought on by intense stress and the inability of parents to cope with the knowledge of their children being tortured. So here we see that torture also suspended, and in some cases destroyed, the worlds of the families of victims. State violence here is depicted as being unleashed on families and entire communities, as opposed to being targeted at individual insurgents. These family and community relationships then formed an intrinsic and meaningful part of the experience of torture.

Sampath was detained and tortured as a suspected JVP insurgent on the basis of a malicious denunciation by local political rivals. He did not have any involvement with the JVP. Sampath needed a lot of reassurance to share his story and remains frightened of being unjustly detained and tortured again. The only ‘crime’ he could think of as having committed he told me, was that of maintaining relationships with childhood friends in the village through the *Bheeshanaya*, including friendships with

some who had joined the JVP. I spoke to both him and his wife about this particular time in their lives.

Wife: My husband (Sampath) was not at home. My cousin had come to visit us... And then suddenly about 20 men came with guns into the house. They dragged my cousin away. We all cried and begged them not to - my father, my mother, and I. He also cried as he was being taken away.

Sampath: My cousin was taken away so I had to go and hand myself in. We went to a couple of camps to try and find out where my cousin was being held. When we got to X police station I realised that he was being kept there. I could tell from their reaction. I went with my whole family to hand myself in. When I gave myself up he was released. But I was transferred from there to X and then to Y ... My family experienced significant suffering when I was inside. They were angry with the Government. My parents fed and looked after my wife.

Wife: First we didn't know where he was. We had to go from (detention) camp to camp, and police station to police station looking for him. Then, a man in the next village whose relative was in X said that Sampath was there. We went every morning to see him. We'd take his food. It was a terrible time. I had to carry my small baby and queue for hours in the hot sun, with hundreds of other people waiting to be let in. There was a lot of time-wasting and 'running around in circles' (*rastiyādu*). Usually, when we would get to X after having stayed in the queues for hours on end, they would say that he had been taken to X. And then we would have to get the bus all the way back to Z. When we got there, they would say that he was in Y, and we would then have to travel there. Like this it went on and on. He didn't know! He was inside. But we were terrified because everyday we would hear of people being killed and burned. So we were in constant fear that it would be him. His relatives went to visit him as well. He got a lot of mental strength through that and from the (support of) his family.

Torturers also purposefully inflicted suffering on the families of detainees. As well as directly inflicting physical pain on the kin of suspected insurgents, excessive bureaucracy, withholding important information about their loved ones, and deliberately misleading families, were common tactics used by torturers to inflict psychological pain on them. This suggests a tendency for torturers to blur the lines between the 'enemy' and her or his family, creating a desire to inflict pain on the latter as an extension of the former. Sampath's story shows how some families rallied around and supported each other during the Terror. Sampath's parents, who were old and poor themselves, took on the burden of supporting his wife and children. We are

further shown the ways in which community networks and relationships functioned amidst violence inflicted by the state, as neighbours co-operated with each other in the search for loved ones. In this case, the family's arduous search is fruitful only when a neighbour from the next village informs them of Sampath's whereabouts.

Sampath's wife's narrative conveys the underlying and constant sense of panic, fear, and uncertainty that families were faced with when she says, "We were terrified because everyday we would hear of people being killed and burned...we were in constant fear". However, the somewhat bitter tone in which his wife told me, "He didn't know, he was inside", suggested a sense of injustice at having her own (and the family's) suffering unacknowledged. It was as important to his wife to have someone bear witness to the pain that the family experienced as a result of state violence, as it was for those who had been detained and tortured themselves.

While the narratives of torture survivors showed families to have been brought together during the violence of the *Bheeshanaya*, others were torn apart by the Terror. Sampath's story told us about the kin of suspected insurgents being detained and tortured to pressurise suspects to turn themselves into the state. This was a commonly acknowledged counter-insurrectionary strategy, which in some cases led to an irreparable breakdown of family relationships. As an insurgent, Nikhil went into hiding at the height of the counter-insurrection. During this time his brother, who was not involved in the JVP, was detained and tortured by state counter-insurrectionary officers in a bid to coerce Nikhil to turn himself in. Nikhil looked distinctly upset as he told me:

Malli (little brother) was taken away and tortured because of my involvement in the JVP. His education was destroyed, and to this day he blames me for it. They (brother's family) have nothing to do with me. I have major regrets on that count (*pasu tävili*). So I told him that he could have the family house, which was written in my name, and I moved away (from the village).

Nikhil's story also shows us the power of pain and violence to linger beneath the surface, and its capacity to impinge on kinship in the aftermath of terror. For Nikhil, the underlying memory of torture manifests itself as guilt and regret along with a deep sense of loss; and for his brother as anger and bitterness.

Remembering Life in Rehabilitation

Some detainees were fortunate enough to be moved on to ‘rehabilitation centres’ from detention. Rehabilitation centres, unlike torture chambers, were not officially denied. The purpose of their existence was explained in terms of “rehabilitating misled youth” (see Gunaratna 1990). Rehabilitation centres were also run by the counter-insurrectionary forces, but people’s experiences of them were markedly different to that of ‘detention centres’. As deduced from the stories that torture survivors told me, living conditions were harsh in these places – they suffered overcrowding, poor sanitation, and the inevitable spread of disease. Nevertheless, they were a vast improvement from that of ‘detention centres’.

Rehabilitation centres were where people were held for observation before being released back into the outside world. They appeared to function as half-way houses between detention and freedom. I did not come across any reports of torture or abuse in rehabilitation centres. My research instead found that rehabilitation centres offered torture victims a breathing space in which to begin the process of piecing together their lives after torture. Inmates were encouraged to develop various skills in a bid to prepare them for life in the outside world. Buddhist monks were often brought in to help with their spiritual development, through meditation and sermons. Uncertainty (of when or whether they would be released) and boredom were the overriding emotions that people remembered from life in rehabilitation, as opposed to the intense fear and extreme uncertainty regarding life itself, which marked their experiences of detention.

Torture survivors’ stories of rehabilitation followed a nostalgic and reminiscent vein, as opposed to the fear narratives of life in ‘detention centres’. Their stories flowed easily, and were free of the emotional excess that stalled narratives of torture in detention. The emphasis on the self and the urgent present of ‘detention centres’ gave way to a more collective sense of being, and fear eased to cautious thoughts about the future. During their rehabilitation, some applied to go to university, some negotiated with counter-insurrectionary officers for day-release to attend various educational courses outside (chaperoned by soldiers), and many attended the vocational training courses and sports programmes offered within the confines of the rehabilitation centre.

People's memories of life in rehabilitation centres did not entail a sense of intimacy with death and debilitating fear, nor were they overwhelmed by a focus on garnering psychological and emotional resources to endure and survive pain. Instead, narratives of rehabilitation centres lay emphasis on finding ways to get through the boredom and uncertainties (milder than that of detention) of their incarceration in rehabilitation centres. People represented life in rehabilitation as offering them more opportunities to exercise agency and more choice in their day-to-day lives.

A theme that dominated people's memories of rehabilitation centres was that of learning and self-development. Young people from rural and remote backgrounds were apparently exposed to new and different experiences in these centres. Many research participants spoke nostalgically about making friends with people from vastly different backgrounds, such as Tamil militants and members of the 'underworld'. They talked about how they learned Tamil from their new Tamil friends and developed a taste for the Tamil food that was brought for them by the families of these friends. They remembered in turn having taught their Tamil friends Sinhala and having their own families make special Sinhala treats for them. This exposure may partly explain the particularly liberal views I came across among almost all my ex-insurgent research participants concerning the issue of Tamil separatism and the civil war in the North. Many torture survivors talked about rehabilitation centres as being shared spaces of learning – both in a formal and informal sense. One ex-insurgent former detainee told me, "In that camp I was able to relax. The fear for my life wasn't there. I wasn't beaten...there were 150 people in my wing (of the building)...it was like a big university for me...the Red Cross would bring us books. The most I read in my life was in there".

Randhir's narrative paints a vivid picture of the kinds of new experiences that people were exposed to in these places.

We created a small group. There was a navy soldier there - he had stolen a weapon and run off with it. The *kasippu mudalali* (illicit alcohol brewing merchant) was there - he always wore the national dress. A Peradeniya University student, and a Tamil militant. The Tamil militant was from a separatist group – I can't remember the name, but they were ultimately killed off by Prabhakaran.³⁵ Our society organised hygiene and social activities. ...We started doing crafts... by digging the floors we found bits of iron and plastic we

³⁵ Prabhakaran was the leader of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) fighting for a separate state for Tamils in Sri Lanka. The LTTE emerged supreme through its elimination of all other Tamil militant and separatist groups, claiming to be the sole voice of the Tamil people. He was killed by state security forces in May 2009.

could use. We also used coconut shells. So we were very busy... The day wasn't enough (*davasa madi*) between all that and queuing up for meals. They used that disgusting condensed milk in the tea and I got a big rash from it. I shared my room with two JVP (Buddhist) monks, a body builder, and a person who did yoga. So we all did yoga and meditated. The body builder used blocks of wood to work out and taught us all how to do that. Our society organised entertainment nights for the inmates. Even the Brigadiers came to watch our performance. We held a huge drama festival and gave out certificates to the winners. I drew the certificates – I still have them somewhere. I knew about Cannes, Hollywood and Bollywood. The others didn't know anything about that. So I shared that knowledge with them. My play won best drama. It was a good period (*maru avadiya*), and I wasn't depressed because I was too busy. Also the yoga helped. I think *we* made and changed our mental state in there.

Randhir's narrative is interesting because it shows us what life was like for those who had been tortured in its immediate aftermath, in a different environment. We can further detect a considerable difference in tone as compared to the narratives of life in detention, which suggests people's memories of rehabilitation to entail significantly less trauma than the former. Nevertheless, life in rehabilitation was still incredibly arduous. Randhir suggests depression to be an overriding factor (in addition to the boredom and uncertainty mentioned earlier) that people strived to grapple with. In Randhir's case, he learned meditation, yoga, and body-building, and got creative with his friends to get through the experience. His complaint about the kind of milk he was served in his rehabilitation centre is telling because it signifies the ease in fear and the sheer change in environment as compared to his stint at the 'detention centre'. None of my research participants mentioned food in detention centres. The stories about detention focussed on fear, survival, and physical and psychological pain. In rehabilitation then, people were allowed to have cautious thoughts about the future, as opposed to being temporally stranded amidst the uncertain and immediate present of possible death.

Randhir highlights the importance of exercising individual agency when he says, "we made and changed our mental (psychological/emotional) state in there", thereby suggesting psychological and emotional resources to play a significant role in tolerating life in rehabilitation centres. The agency exercised here is shown to be of a more positive nature to that expressed in detention. Rather than withholding information and defying torturers, people are shown to draw on various strategies to survive the boredom, uncertainty, and depression, that tainted their time in

rehabilitation, and to make the most of the opportunities available for learning and self-development.

This chapter has been preoccupied with the stories of torture survivors and paid attention to the ways in which their experiences of violence are remembered, articulated, and ascribed meaning. I have argued that torture is expressible and that it is infused with moral meaning, rooted in 'intimate' relationships, by survivors. The next chapter builds on these findings by exploring the perspectives of former counter-insurrectionary officers, and in particular considering the ways in 'perpetrators' give meaning to torture.

Chapter 4

Talking About Torture: Stories of Former Counter-Insurrectionary Officers

This chapter focuses on the stories of former counter-insurrectionary officers of the state. Here, I examine how torture is remembered, expressed, and given meaning by its ‘perpetrators’, and consider the ways in which former counter-insurrectionary officers go about appropriating moral responsibility for violence. In the previous chapter I argued that the experience of torture was expressible and that it was infused with meaning by its ‘victims’, contrary to the arguments put forward by some scholars (see Scarry 1985 and 2004, Daniel 1996, Das 2007, Aretxaga 2001). A central contention of this chapter is that torture carries meaning to its ‘perpetrators’ as well, which contributes to its abhorrence. Former counter-insurgency officers anchored their memories of violence in ideas of ‘intimacy’, emphasising in particular the betrayal of ‘intimacy’ as being ethically unjustifiable.

Like that of their ‘victims’, the stories of ‘perpetrators’ of state violence also carried a strong moral undercurrent, attesting to Lambek’s (1996) arguments about memory as an ethical practice. Their narratives refused to attend to the category of ‘perpetrator’, and instead they made claims on the subject position of ‘victim’, interspersed with that of ‘hero’. Competing claims by former insurgents and former counter-insurgency officers for the subject position of ‘victim’ reflects its political attractiveness, which is largely based on the moral weight that it carries (see Ross 2003b). The narratives of former counter-insurrectionary officers were structured around a language of justification, denial, and deflection, and as such bear similarity to the accounts of former insurgents concerning their own complicity in insurrectionary violence, as seen elsewhere in this thesis.

Talking to ‘Perpetrators’ of State Violence

Tracking down the shadowy counter-insurrectionary officers about whom I had heard so much from former detainees, was challenging. Persuading them to share their stories with me was even harder. Many former counter-insurrectionary officers initially considered me with ill-concealed distrust and later divulged their suspicions

of my being a spy for an international human rights organisation or a local politician's lackey. Here too, the gradual development of trust and assurance of confidentiality played a crucial role in their agreement to break the silence on the sensitive subject of torture during the *Bheeshanaya*.

The counter-insurrectionary officers whose stories inform this chapter were all retired from the state security forces, and drawn from a wide geographical spread across the country. The research participant group was made up of people ranging from the highest ranks of the security forces, to those who served as ordinary soldiers at the lower rungs of the hierarchy. They had all served as counter-insurrectionary officers during the *Bheeshanaya*, and some had been posted in 'detention centres' situated in army camps, police stations, and temporarily occupied public and private buildings. However, it is significant to note that all former counter-insurrectionary officers categorically denied having perpetrated torture during the Terror. In the case of at least one such research participant, anecdotal evidence from our mutual contacts and the whispered gossip of neighbours suggested otherwise. It is impossible to tell who, if any, of the former counter-insurrectionary officers featured in this chapter perpetrated torture during the *Bheeshanaya*. I wish to reiterate that eliciting confessions is not the aim of this thesis. My interest lies instead, in exploring the ways in which 'perpetrators' of violence remember and reconstruct their disturbing pasts, and how they come to terms with it in the present.

I was met with significant apprehension from former counter-insurrectionary officers I interviewed for this research. Their reluctance to speak of torture was partly influenced by fears of legal and personal repercussions, and also reflected a concern to protect the image of the security forces and that of themselves. One former counter-insurrectionary officer for instance, candidly expressed to me his fear of "revealing official army secrets", which he told me would pose a threat to his own life. Moreover, talking about the torture that took place during the *Bheeshanaya* would invariably entail remembering themselves as 'perpetrators' of violence - a subject position carrying negative moral connotations that people were keen to reject.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the context of recall was marked by high profile polemics on human rights between the Sri Lankan Government and international human rights organisations, with regard to the detention of suspected Tamil militants. While these debates may have influenced the willingness of torture survivors to break their silence, it appeared to have a further muzzling effect on 'perpetrators' of state violence. This goes some way towards explaining the denial,

avoidance, and hedging, that characterise the stories of the small number of former counter-insurrectionary officers who ultimately agreed to participate in this research.³⁶

Why Tell Stories of Torture?

Payne's (2008) insightful work on state 'perpetrators' of violence based on case studies from Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and South Africa, lays emphasis on institutionally facilitated public confessions. These entailed various means through which the public could collectively address their troubling past, and involved several forms of amnesty and judicial trials for perpetrators who agreed to narrate their pasts. In the context of this research, the stories of former counter-insurrectionary officers were told in the private sphere, and on the premise of anonymity and confidentiality. Thereby, they were of a more intimate nature and arguably at times more candid and reflexive, as a result. The 'perpetrators' featured in my research had no significant identifiable political or personal rewards to reap from speaking out about their violent pasts (e.g., unlike the amnesty offered to those agreeing to participate in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission). In fact, former counter-insurrectionary officers here appear to have had more to lose by breaking their silence and defying the denial that shrouded this subject. So why did they agree to speak out about the violence of the *Bheeshanaya*?

Many former counter-insurrectionary officers I spoke to were keenly aware of the stigma attached to them and the moral denigration of their actions during the *Bheeshanaya*. I even came across a few incidents where former counter-insurrectionary officers had been forced into exile from their home villages due to being ostracised by their neighbours after the Terror. The moral repugnance against the violence perpetrated by counter-insurrectionary officers was partly based on it being inflicted on 'intimates'. The willingness of former counter-insurrectionary officers to share their stories with me, was partly influenced by this post-terror context. The few former counter-insurrectionary officers who did agree to participate in this research told me that they were keen for me to hear "their side" of the story. They perceived popular opinion of the state counter-insurrectionary efforts to be overwhelmingly negative and misinformed. As such, through their engagement with

³⁶ Human rights was not an entirely 'alien' concept to the Sri Lankan military at the time of these high profile debates. Following its advent in 1994, significant efforts were made by the PA Government led by President Kumaratunga, to increase training and awareness of human rights among the police and Sri Lankan security forces (see Spencer 2007: 118-120).

memory they reconstructed what they perceived as an alternative narrative of the *Bheeshanaya*. The portrayal of counter-insurrectionary officers in moral and heroic terms, a division of the world into ‘good’ and ‘evil’, and a rationalisation of the counter-insurrection characterised their alternative ‘truth’. Through their stories, former counter-insurrectionary officers engaged in a reworking of the past and a retrospective refashioning of the self, in order to alter their relationship to that past and make it more conducive to life in the present. Their narrative reconstructions allowed them to give meaning to their morally troubling experiences, and to find ways of coming to terms with their actions in the aftermath of terror.

Narrative Markers

In her study on the public confessions of perpetrators of state violence, Payne found their reinventions of the past to entail “remorse, heroism, denial, sadism, silence, fiction and lies, amnesia, and betrayal” (2008: 19). She argues that in the rare instances in which perpetrators do speak out “they often evoke a vocabulary they were taught by the authoritarian regime: denial, justification, excuses, and euphemisms that hide their acts from themselves and from others” (2008: 20). Some of these themes emerged in the torture narratives of former counter-insurrectionary officers, as we shall see in this chapter.

As mentioned earlier, reluctance and avoidance overshadowed the overall narrative process. Former counter-insurrectionary officers’ stories further had a rehearsed and scripted quality to them, and I was surprised to find that some even spoke from notes they had prepared earlier, particularly at the initial stages of our interviews. While many relaxed into their stories as our relationship of mutual trust developed over time, I constantly got a sense of memories being withheld and of an on-going exercise of internal censorship. Their memories overall contained many contradictions, and in some instances articulation was marked by incoherence, which made analysing their stories somewhat difficult for me as a researcher. This incoherence and contradiction were partly due to the pressure of heavy editing. It also hinted at an underlying sense of moral discomfort, which was evident particularly when it concerned the teller’s own possible complicity in torture.³⁷

³⁷ The scripted nature of the narrative interpretations of ‘perpetrators’ of violence has also been highlighted in other studies (see Payne 2008), and is further evident elsewhere in this thesis, particularly in the accounts of insurrectionary violence belonging to former insurgents who continue to support the JVP.

A projection of the self in moral terms and a rejection of responsibility for torture overwhelmingly marked the narratives of former counter-insurrectionary officers. Payne (2008) has argued that ‘perpetrators’ of state violence very rarely confess. When they do so, rather than disclosing truths, they merely give explanations, rationalisations, and justifications, which entail “vital lies” minimising their own responsibility, and serving personal and political ends. There are many similarities to be found between the findings of my research and that of Payne’s study. However, an important divergence arises from the influence on the mediation of memory exerted by the private spaces in which former counter-insurrectionary officers told me their stories, the ‘intimate’ nature of our conversations, and the absence of any tangible material or political incentives for ‘sharing’ their personal memories. In such a context of telling, what emerged were contradictory and ambiguous narratives that were pregnant with ethical claims (see Lambek 1996). While on the face of it, former counter-insurrectionary officers appeared to avoid moral responsibility for violence and deny involvement in torture, their rationalisation of state violence suggested that they did not entirely reject an acknowledgement of complicity in it. Former ‘perpetrators’ of state violence it seemed, continued living life after violence with this contradiction, as we shall see in the stories that follow.

‘Intimacy’ and Betrayal

What made the torture of the *Bheeshanaya* morally incomprehensible for many people was its perpetration between people who appeared to be ‘the same’; those who were ‘intimates’. ‘Perpetrators’ of state violence often shared the same religious, ethnic and social background as their ‘victims’, and it was not uncommon to hear of people who had been tortured by their neighbours or people they knew. The stories of former counter-insurrectionary officers were largely woven around this theme of ‘intimacy’ and its perceived betrayal. They drew on it in their explanations of the counter-insurgency, and to support their justification of state violence. ‘Intimacy’ appeared to function as a narrative lens through which they were able to reflect on an unsettling past and understand their own actions therein.

Many former counter-insurrectionary officers attributed the initial reluctance of the security-forces to violently crack-down on insurgents, to a recognition of JVP

insurgents being ‘the same’, or “our boys” (*apē kollo*). This shows an acknowledgment on the part of the security forces, of an ‘intimate community’ to which they and JVP insurgents belonged. Many members of the security forces also had family and village friends in the JVP. The civil war with the Tamil ethnic and religious ‘other’, along with the accompanying nationalistic rhetoric propagated by vociferous politicians, further contributed to the sense of an imagined ‘intimate community’ of Sinhala (in particular Buddhist) people, who were perceived as collectively facing the threat of Tamil terrorism.

A common perception among former counter-insurrectionary officers I interviewed about their initial reluctance to crush the JVP insurgency, was typified in the words of one senior officer who told me: “We didn’t see why we had to kill our own boys. We felt that we should be fighting the Tigers in the North”. This comment signifies recognition of JVP insurgents as being ‘the same’ and ‘the familiar’, and the supplementary use of kinship metaphors (“our boys”) here further suggests a sense of “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 1997). This stands in sharp contrast to how Tamil insurgents in the North were construed - as different, the stranger, and the distant ‘other’. Identifying ‘the other’ as the enemy proved easier than identifying ‘the same’ as the enemy. References to “our boys” in the stories belonging to former counter-insurrectionary officers implied ‘intimate’ relationships to be underpinned by certain unspoken values and obligations. In the context of the *Bheeshanaya*, this appeared to entail shared understandings of ‘standing together’ and ‘being on the same side’. If, as Das states, communities are formed through agreements (2007: 9), then ‘intimate’ communities can also be destroyed when these agreements, tacit or explicit, are betrayed. The dramatic shift in perception that resulted in the identification of ‘the same’ and ‘the intimate’, as ‘the enemy within’, was down to this perceived betrayal of ‘intimacy’ and the assumption of trust that went with it. This formed the basis of rationalisations offered by former counter-insurrectionary officers, for violence inflicted on ‘suspected insurgents’ during the *Bheeshanaya*.

The unexpected betrayal of ‘intimacy’ by the JVP as perceived by counter-insurrectionary officers, came in the form of the infamous threat issued by the JVP to members of the security forces and their families in 1989, and the apparent implementation of this threat. The resounding shock of being betrayed by ‘their own boys’ invoked feelings of anger, indignation, and a thirst for revenge, among members of security forces. The unpredicted reality of their “own boys” turning on them, resulted in the security forces now “running pell-mell after them (insurgents)”,

in the words of one senior former counter-insurrectionary officer. This officer also went on to tell me that he believed the audacity of the JVP to betray the security forces stemmed from its own belief that the latter “wouldn’t take on their own people militarily”. He thereby intimated that the JVP itself knew it belonged to this ‘intimate community’ and was aware of the underlying normative values and obligations that bound it. The JVP’s betrayal of ‘intimacy’ then, is depicted as having been deliberate and so, morally unjustifiable.

Intimate relationships are unpredictable and it is hardest to take the betrayal of those seemingly closest to you. Many former counter-insurrectionary officers told me that they were taken completely by surprise when faced with the violence and threats of the JVP, of Sinhala Buddhist people themselves. So surprised were they that some senior officers went as far as admitting that they did not even have troops sufficiently trained to challenge the JVP, despite the insurrection having been well under way for almost two years. Faced with the reality of betrayal, the enemy now was considered to be on the inside, and the people who posed a threat were those like themselves, similar to the Indonesian notion of the ‘criminal’, who “is always on the edge of Indonesian society but never outside it, never the foreigner” (Siegel 1998: 2). Indeed for some former counter-insurrectionary officers, the ease with which insurgents melted into the wider population and the difficulty they faced in distinguishing insurgents from the rest of the rural Sinhala masses appeared to have been a vexation borne of the enemy being the ‘same’. The ensuing ‘witch-panic’ entailed a violent persecution aimed at purifying society of ‘the enemy within’ (see Roper 2004, Briggs 2006). In some rural villages, all young male inhabitants were detained, disappeared, or murdered, and there were other instances where entire villages deemed particularly susceptible to ‘subversive’ activity (due to reasons such as social disadvantage or low caste status) were violently decimated (see Gunaratna 1990).

In depicting counter-insurgency violence as being necessitated by the betrayal of ‘intimacy’, former counter-insurrectionary officers attempted to rationalise and justify their complicity in terror. Moreover, they implied that former insurgents brought the violence on themselves, thereby deflecting blame onto the ‘victim’. This has been identified as being a common position taken by state ‘perpetrators’ of violence in other studies as well (see Payne 2008, Foster et al. 2005). In their study of ‘perpetrators’ of violence in the context of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Foster et al. (2005) have identified members of the Apartheid regime’s state security forces to have utilised three modes of narrative deflection. These were

that of passing responsibility upwards to politicians, sideways to other people within their own organisations or other organisations, and downwards with various forms of victim-blaming (2005: 336). While all three patterns of deflection were found in my research, and are discussed at various points in this thesis where relevant, the particular narrative frame employed by former counter-insurrectionary officers entailing betrayal of 'intimacy' falls within the last category. This shifts the blame on to the 'victim' by implying that they somehow 'deserved' the violence inflicted on them.

The Enemy Within and Affective Story-telling

Former counter-insurrectionary officers continued to build on the notion of the 'intimate' turned 'enemy' in their narrative constructions. Through this they described the various emotions they remembered as having experienced when faced with this 'internal enemy'. Indeed, a striking characteristic of the narratives of counter-insurrectionary officers was the important role given to emotion in them. In a similar vein to the stories of torture 'victims', 'perpetrators' of state violence also spoke of the complex and ambivalent emotions that they experienced during the Terror, such as fear, anger, surprise, sympathy, and uncertainty. However, there was a difference in the use of emotion between the two groups in their narrative retellings of the past. Torture 'victims', as we saw in the previous chapter, emphasised in their stories, the emotions that they had experienced during their ordeals, while at the same time apparently 'reliving' some aspects of these emotions during the telling (e.g., as expressed through body language). This in turn affected the overall articulation of their traumatic memories. In the case of former counter-insurrectionary officers, the narrative content of their violent past contained verbal descriptions of emotions that they remembered experiencing during the *Bheeshanaya*. This did not appear, however, to affect the actual telling of their stories and their rigidly controlled body language was largely devoid of emotional expression.

The lack of any evident emotion expressed during the process of narration may partly be down to the discipline inculcated by the military socialisation of this research participant group. I was struck by the similarities that existed across individual counter-insurrectionary officers who participated in this research, in terms of their upright postures and 'closed' body language, their militaristic manner of

interaction, and the overall authoritative and firm tone of their voices. This made me very much aware of being in the presence of ‘military men’. On two rare occasions involving two different former counter-insurrectionary officers, I noticed this military veneer crack briefly to express fleeting signs of emotional distress. This was the result of the trauma associated with recall, and signifies the psychologically (and perhaps ethically) disturbing nature of their memories of violence from the *Bheeshanaya*.

Jackson has argued that storytelling is lived through the interaction of the bodies of the teller and listener, whereby people reach out to each other (2002: 28). The tight control exercised over body language and emotion resulted in my failure to feel any strong ‘connection’ between the narrative, the teller, and myself as the listener. One may argue nevertheless, that former counter-insurrectionary officers did attempt in a sense to ‘reach out’ through the emphasis they laid on emotion in their narrative content. This emotional detail described through their stories, either consciously or unintentionally, served several narrative functions. It lent authenticity to their stories, and a sense of moral credence to the defensive ‘truth’ they put forward. By remembering emotions such as fear, vulnerability, and uncertainty, former counter-insurrectionary officers were positioning themselves as ‘victims’ rather than ‘perpetrators’.

Rishen, a former counter-insurrectionary officer belonging to the lower ranks of the security forces, worked in a notorious torture chamber during the *Bheeshanaya*, in which many former insurgents who participated in this research were detained and tortured. His comment below alludes to the complex mix of emotions that ‘perpetrators’ of state violence felt towards their ‘intimate’ victims. Speaking of the detainees held in the torture chamber in which he was posted, Rishen told me, “I felt anger towards them. Because we were attacked. They stole our weapons and attacked our mobile patrols. But I also felt sorry for them.” A confusing mix of anger and sympathy towards suspected insurgents were emotions remembered by several former counter-insurrectionary officers. Anger appeared to result from betrayal, and empathy from recognition of similarity and ‘intimacy’. After all, we tend to empathise most with those who are closest to us. This mix of sympathy and rage (along with fear, vulnerability, and desires for revenge, as we shall see in the narratives that follow) show situations of extreme terror to evoke a complex blend of contradictory emotions in those who perpetrate violence.

Having ‘their boys’ suddenly turn on them also stirred up emotions of intense fear and a sense of vulnerability among counter-insurrectionary officers. Their stories

depicted the fearful threat posed by the JVP to fuel the perceived urgent need to violently eliminate it. This is illustrated once again by Rishen in his reconstruction of an incident in which a unit of soldiers, including himself, were called on to guard a police station in a remote village, which secret intelligence had found was due to be attacked by insurgents:

That night in pitch, bitter darkness (*titta kaluvara*) we were guarding the station, and we were terrified. Then suddenly the (other) soldiers started saying that they could hear the boys (JVP insurgents) coming to attack us. So we started firing our guns. The next morning we realised that what we had thought was a group of 500 boys, was in fact a herd of water-buffalo, who all lay dead in the paddy-fields opposite the police station. That was the fear us soldiers had of the JVP.

Payne has argued that perpetrators of state violence describe defenceless victims as fierce enemies who must be defeated through various military virtues such as courage, self-sacrifice, and heroism (2008: 20). The JVP insurgents with whom counter-insurrectionary officers were locked in battle were far from 'defenceless victims', and were in themselves terrorising people through their increasingly arbitrary use of violence. But within the confines of the torture chamber they were 'victims' overpowered by the violence of the state. Furthermore, many of the 'suspected insurgents' tortured, disappeared, and murdered, were innocent of involvement in insurrectionary activity, or had been detained on spurious charges, such as putting up JVP posters or being the friend or relative of a suspected insurgent.

The narrative reconstructions of former counter-insurrectionary officers entailed a particular representation of the (suspected) 'insurgent' as fearsome and threatening, while imbuing the 'perpetrator' of state violence with the human qualities of vulnerability, fear, and justifiable anger. This is not to deny however, that 'perpetrators' of state violence themselves would have felt such emotions on being the targets of insurrectionary violence. The specific articulation of these emotions nevertheless, served to amplify the threat posed by the JVP and to justify the 'retaliatory' or 'defensive' violence of the state (and their own possible complicity in torture). Emotion in narrative here, worked against the popular stigma attached to counter-insurrectionary officers as 'inhuman', by representing them to possess

feelings and emotions of their own, not dissimilar to that of their ‘victims’. The narratives of former counter-insurrectionary officers further contributed to the distortion of ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ categories, by representing suspected insurgents as the aggressive and threatening enemy, and ‘perpetrators’ of state violence as their ‘victims’.

Foster et al. (2005) in the context of the South African conflict have shown how members of the Apartheid regime’s police forces in repeating ‘them’ versus ‘us’ contrasts, painted “a moral and rhetorical picture of (themselves) ... as merely reactive”. The authors go on to contend that in this victim-blaming narrative strategy that they employ, ‘perpetrators’ of state violence tend to draw on extreme examples to derive sympathy from the audience (2005: 284). We may interpret Matheesha’s story below, which also draws on extreme examples from his past in the *Bheeshanaya* to highlight the aggressive qualities of the insurgent ‘enemy’, in a similar vein. It deflects blame for violence onto insurgents and depicts them as deserving of the terror unleashed by the state, while at the same time lending authenticity and moral credence to his own position. What complicates the situation of the *Bheeshanaya* is that while insurgents were indeed ‘victims’ of torture, they were also ‘perpetrators’ of violence themselves. As a result, his story below cannot be read as a straightforward and clear-cut ‘victim-blaming’ narrative strategy.

Matheesha is a former senior counter-insurrectionary officer. As is common to the military forces of many countries, the higher echelons of the Sri Lankan security forces draw their members from the educated elites (while those of poorer backgrounds tend to occupy the lower ranks). Matheesha’s privileged background was reflected in his request to conduct the interview in English, as it was the language he felt most comfortable conversing in. Matheesha’s parents and three siblings had been murdered by the JVP, because he had not heeded to their demand to desert the armed forces. Much of his narrative was visibly rehearsed, but this particular extract appeared not to be so and diverted from the script. It unusually entailed a genuine show of emotion and was spoken with some hesitance. Matheesha told me:

My family was killed because I was in the army. By that time I had seen other officers lose their families, and been to many funerals. But still it was out of the blue – a complete shock [his upright military-man veneer cracks. He looks stunned and then starts getting upset]. You don’t think that it could happen to

you. You know they were really heartless. I was a X (high rank) in the army. I wasn't expected to run after them with a gun. I was expected to sit behind a desk in an a/c (air-conditioned) office. I went to Y (rural town) to protect the people...It was night and at the Y junction a young girl came running towards my jeep, hysterical, crying that her husband had just been shot... We got to her house and he was lying on the floor in a pool of blood. He had been shot by the JVP for working ...during a *hartāl* (JVP imposed unofficial curfew) ...He wasn't involved in politics...She fell to the floor and worshipped me, begging me to find his killers. They were really heartless.

Matheesha's positioning in this narrative is one of victim, which makes the transition to that of 'protector' or 'saviour'. Payne has argued that,

As soldiers, perpetrators contend they had a duty to defend the nation from communism, terrorism, or barbarism. Asserting that the ends (defeating the threat to the nation) justify the (usually unarticulated) means, perpetrators portray themselves as forces of "good" against forces of "evil". (Payne 2008: 20–21)

Here, the shock brought on by the unexpected betrayal of one's own, leads Matheesha to clearly identify the 'intimate' insurgent as the heartless 'enemy', and to now draw lines of differentiation between 'the insurgent' and 'ordinary' Sinhala people. The former is 'heartless' and thus not human, while the latter he imbues with a human heart through the portrayal of the grieving young woman. The latter then are in need of urgent protection from the insurgent – 'the enemy within'. The unprovoked horrific attack on his own family provides Matheesha with a personal reason to cleanse society of the insurgent who spreads grief and disorder throughout the body of intimate society. Matheesha's story overall carries ethical and heroic undertones. In it, heroic members of the security forces' who themselves have been 'victims' of violence, must put their own lives on the line to eliminate the violent threat posed to society by the heartless, 'internal enemy'.

Payne refers to "salvation myths" and heroic statements of "saving the country from subversion" that mark some of the rare confessions of perpetrators of state violence, which in turn reactivate the regimes' justifications for these acts (2008). The narratives of former counter-insurrectionary officers like Matheesha lend some

authenticity to Payne's overall argument here, in terms of their reliance on heroic purposes of salvation for the justification of state terror. Nevertheless, this is not to say that these "salvation myths" and stories of heroism were simply calculated narrative strategies devised for the sole purpose of avoiding responsibility for violence and deflecting blame onto the victim.

The violence of the *Bheeshanaya* operated at several levels and in many complex layers, with the categories of 'perpetrator' and 'victim' constantly blurring and merging into each other. Some former counter-insurrectionary officers like Matheesha, were themselves 'victims' of insurgent violence, which in turn fuelled their desire to exact violent revenge on those they perceived to pose a real threat to society. While I got the distinct impression that there was some awareness (and even discomfort) among former counter-insurrectionary officers of the morally problematic nature of their past actions in hindsight, in another sense they also appeared to genuinely believe (or want to believe) that their actions were in fact morally driven and justifiable. In remembering themselves in terms of victimhood, and their actions as being driven by morally just purposes, they were attempting to find ways of living with their unsettling pasts, and themselves, in the post-terror present.

Torturing to Civilise Transgressors

The vast majority of stories told by former counter-insurrectionary officers made implicit references to torture being a necessary tool for civilising, for meting out justice, and for punishing transgression. In the *Bheeshanaya* it would seem that members of the security forces believed that they should take it upon themselves to act on behalf of the wider Sinhala community in punishing social and moral transgressors and thereby restoring a sense of order. This responsibility was construed as taking on particular importance in the prevailing context of chaos, impunity, and disorder. Matheesha, the senior counter-insurrectionary officer we heard from earlier, alludes to this below.

It (the counter-insurrection) has to be done in a professional way. If a man is caught with arms he must be tried in court with solid evidence. But in an insurrection of that magnitude, when the Government was fighting two wars, where people were scared to come forward and give evidence due to intimidation (by the JVP). It is difficult to prove charges...So the military felt that justice had to be somehow meted out.

Soma, a former counter-insurrectionary officer belonging to the lower ranks of the army further elaborated on the idea of justice as motivating his violent actions during the Terror. He paints a vivid picture of the context of terror, and represents violence to have been the necessary and viable alternative available to restore order and protect Sinhala society. My questions about his memories of working in a ‘detention centre’ were met with silence and avoidance. Soma instead, chose to articulate his memories of this period by recounting a story from his subsequent posting to a Sinhala village bordering LTTE contested territory towards the tail end of the counter-insurrection.

We had the LTTE on one side, and the JVP on the other. We faced battles from both sides everyday. And we also had robberies and rapes occurring almost everyday in those areas. I was shot at and really faced the fear of death there (*maraneṭa bhaya*). We were really in trouble. Then one day a really innocent/naïve (*ahinsaka*) man from the village came to us and said that a man had come to his house and abducted his wife in front of him. I asked him why he didn’t take a scythe and kill the man to protect his wife. He was very shy (*lājja*). He told us who the abductor was. There was no law or court system or police to go to. So we just caught him (the culprit), hung him up on a mango tree, and beat him with a sand-filled S-lon (PVC) pipe.

The pressure that members of the security forces were under and the overwhelming sense of fear they felt amidst a chaotic environment of impunity and routinised violence is illustrated in Soma’s narrative. Soma’s story grounds state terror in rich context, lending support to the view expressed by many former counter-insurrectionary officers, that the abnormal climate of terror necessitated extraordinary measures to protect society and restore order. Soma’s story conveys the message that in a violent world in disarray, where there was no recourse to legal authority, counter-insurrectionary officers were forced to take on the role of being

purveyors of justice. Justice here was meted out through the only (violent) means available at the time. By rationalising torture in this manner, and in imbuing its perpetration with altruistic and moral purposes, Soma, both acknowledges his involvement in perpetrating torture and at the same time absolves himself of moral responsibility for it.

Let us now return to the story of Rishen, the former counter-insurrectionary officer who worked in one of the notorious torture chambers. His story provides an example of the ways in which ‘perpetrators’ of state violence give voice to their dubious pasts and the means through which they rationalise their actions therein. Rishen adamantly denied having perpetrated torture himself. This was despite his neighbours gossiping that his raging alcoholism was down to a guilty conscience stemming from his torture of “innocent boys” (*ahinsaka kollo*) during the *Bheeshanaya*. Half-way through our interview, Rishen told me a somewhat strange story, incoherent at certain points, which was as close as he came to acknowledging culpability for torture during the *Bheeshanaya*. Rishen framed his story in terms of a deserved ‘punishment’ meted out to a young drug addict during the Terror. The drug-addict featured in his story had apparently been harassing people in the village and Rishen told me that he had wanted to “teach him a lesson” (*pāḍamak ugannanna*). He told me that he had detained the young man, stripped him naked, tied him to a tyre, and beaten him. Rishen proceeded to pour kerosene over him, which he told me burned the young victim’s skin. He then lit a match and held it over the young man who was soaked in kerosene and tied to the tyre. Rishen threatened to set the man alight, shouting at him over and over again “Will you do drugs again?” The young man had shouted in response “My mother! my mother! (*magē ammō!*) I will never do drugs again!” and Rishen said that he had then released his victim. According to Rishen, the victim had apparently returned years later, glowing with health and material success, to thank Rishen for rehabilitating him. This story was related to me in a boastful manner. Rishen credited his position in the army with giving him the opportunity to ‘civilise’ people. He told me with an air of satisfaction: “I am surprised (*pudumai*) at how well I was able to civilise (*hadanna*) people in those days”.³⁸

The violence used on the drug-addict by Rishen, as recounted in his story, mimics common forms of torture used on detained suspected insurgents during the *Bheeshanaya*. Rishen indirectly appears to have been telling me about the torture he

³⁸ The Sinhala word *hadanna* translates as ‘make’. However, its use also refers to ‘civilise’, ‘mould’, ‘discipline’, and ‘create’. For example, it is used with reference to disciplining children, and if one behaves in an inappropriate way s/he is said to show that s/he has not been properly ‘made’ (i.e., disciplined or brought up well - *hadicca nati kama*).

had perpetrated against suspected insurgents, refashioned as the more ‘acceptable’ story of punishing a drug-addict. Violence against ‘unsavoury’ elements in society (both by the JVP and the security forces) during the *Bheeshanaya* was generally judged to be morally justifiable, in contrast to political violence. This narrative device was a means of giving voice to his memories of torture, and an acknowledgment of his complicity in it. At the same time it was a rejection of moral responsibility for violence and an adherence to the state narrative of denial. In essence, Rishen’s ambiguous story provides a moral rationalisation for state violence. In portraying the former counter-insurrectionary officer here as a morally righteous being, and in injecting his motivations for violence with altruism, Rishen implicitly provides an elaborate justification for the perpetration of torture during the *Bheeshanaya*. In his story, the victim returns to thank Rishen for rehabilitating him, and he further reflects with satisfaction on a job well done, for having ‘civilised’ social transgressors during the Terror. Rishen remembers and justifies his own complicity in torture in ethical terms. This allows him to continue living with the consequences of his actions, and himself, in the present.

Torture then, according to the stories we have heard thus far, was considered by some former counter-insurrectionary officers to be an appropriate punishment for the betrayal of ‘intimacy’. It was a ‘civilising’ process to re-make the moral and social transgressor, to restore a sense of order to, and to protect society. This division of the world into ‘good’ and ‘evil’, and the attempt to bring back and rehabilitate those who had transgressed into the world of ‘evil’ then gives us an insight into the ways in which ‘perpetrators’ of state violence understood and gave meaning to their actions. Some who were deemed to have ‘learned’ their civilising lessons were spared, like Kirihami the ex-insurgent who told us in the previous chapter that he been “educated” through his beatings, and the drug addict who changed his ways. In this sense then, the violence of the *Bheehsanaya* was interpreted in the minds of former counter-insurrectionary officers as a means of righting a moral wrong and restoring order (see Feldman 1991, Das 2007).

Rishen employs the allegory of the drug-addict above in a bid to sanitise the torture that he perpetrated during the *Bheeshanaya*. In using a drug addict who harasses ordinary civilians as protagonist in his story, he represents the victim as deserving of violence. He also gives his story a happy ending, with the protagonist moving on to lead a successful life and even returning to thank his ‘former counter-insurrectionary officer’, demonstrating a lesson learned well, and of the ends

justifying the means employed. Rishen was not the only former counter-insurrectionary officer to do so. We can see a similar narrative pattern in Matheesha's story below. Matheesha uses military metaphors and euphemisms to rationalise the violence of the state.

In a situation of complete anarchy, disorder, and disarray, you can't expect anything to go by the book. Trying people in a court of law may be soothing to NGOs and Human Rights organisations. I believe that a moral stand must be taken. But the bitter truth is that when everything is in disarray, you can't expect just one thing to proceed in an orderly manner. Look at Iraq now. The US and UK being the best managers of democracy are fairing worse than third world countries there. We were not geared to take on the challenge of the northern and southern insurrections simultaneously...It's like a boxing match. If there are two people in a boxing ring, and one is armed with a hand grenade, then the other one has to fight him with force and try the same means to knock him out. In the absence of a referee, there is no judge to give scores. The only thing left is to meet the challenge, and to ... defeat the other in whatever way you can.

The pressure that the security forces were under and its lack of preparedness to meet the challenge posed by the JVP, is illustrated in the narrative above. It further reflects the power of the JVP (whose success seemed close at hand) by representing the insurgent as an equal (if not better equipped) contender in a boxing ring, whose threat could only be repelled by a knee-jerk reaction of like-for-like force. Matheesha rationalises that the counter-insurrectionary forces were resorting to the only means available to them to protect themselves and society from the colossal internal threat they were faced with. This suggests that survival was at the forefront of the minds of both those who were subjected to torture (as seen in the previous chapter), as well as the 'perpetrators' of state violence who inflicted it.

The moral discomfort that Matheesha appears to be grappling with personally can be gleaned from his comment: "I believe a moral stand must be taken, but ...", which suggests this to be at the root of his attempts to justify and rationalise state violence, and by extension his own complicity in it. His concern to avoid tarnishing the image of the state is evident in his drawing on valid comparisons between the atrocities committed by the USA and the UK in the Middle East, and that of the Sri Lankan Government during the Terror. The metaphor of the boxing match that Matheesha draws on, serves several purposes in depicting a struggle between the

forces of ‘good’ and ‘evil’. It primarily offers a justification of state terror, based on the ends justifying the means. The moralistic end here is to protect society by suppressing the danger posed to it by the ‘internal enemy’, and to restore order.

Deflecting Moral Culpability and Getting on with the Job

As well as deflecting responsibility for violence onto the ‘victim’ (i.e., the ‘internal enemy’ who betrayed his or her intimates), former counter-insurrectionary officers also drew on the narrative strategy of deflection to apportion moral responsibility for state violence to their peers and political leaders. All former counter-insurrectionary officers I interviewed categorically pointed the finger of blame at the political leaders of Sri Lanka for the emergence of the insurgency itself, which in turn necessitated retaliatory state-terror according to them. Some also made a point of emphasising individual politicians’ own complicity in torture to settle personal and political scores during the Terror. Many accused the UNP governing politicians of corruption, inertia, elitism, and a failure to address the valid grievances of young people and problems of social deprivation. It was evident from their stories that many believed their personal moral call was to protect ‘ordinary’ Sinhala society, as opposed to state politicians towards whom they expressed poorly hidden derision.³⁹ Rather than solely being a calculated narrative strategy for deflecting responsibility for violence up the way, many former counter-insurrectionary officers showed a genuine appreciation of the political failings that had led so many young people to join the JVP in a bid to seize state power.

Some former counter-insurrectionary officers shifted culpability side-ways towards their peers through their narrative reconstructions. Rishen, for instance who worked in a notorious torture chamber, avoided admitting his own involvement in inflicting torture on suspected insurgent detainees, but spoke of torture being perpetrated by his colleagues, referring to them as “animals” (*sattu*) for their participation in torture. Deflection of blame as a narrative trend has also been highlighted in other studies on the public confessions of state perpetrators of violence (see Foster et al. 2005, Payne 2008). Rishen’s deflection of culpability here reflected

³⁹ The vast majority of members of the state security forces (particularly at the lower ranks) shared social backgrounds (and kinship ties) with the insurgents they hunted down. As a result they were able to empathise with the grievances that the JVP highlighted. The divergence arose when the JVP started targeting family members of the state security forces.

the ethical judgement passed on violence in the aftermath and the need to negotiate sociality in the present.

Studies have shown desensitisation to violence, bureaucracy, the division of labour, pressure to conform, and socialisation to follow orders, as factors influencing people who perpetrate violence (see Browning 2001, Arendt 1994, Milgram 1974). A few counter-insurrectionary officers also remembered violently crushing the insurgency as being a pragmatic task, and rationalised it as a means of ‘getting on with the job’. Given that torture continues to be a normalised component of interrogation in Sri Lanka, some counter-insurrectionary officers may have seen the torture of detainees as a routine aspect of carrying out their job. Of his work in the infamous torture chamber, Rishen told me: “when you are doing your job there you have to try and not let things affect you”. In doing so he underlines the importance of consciously suppressing or altering one’s own ethical discomfort in perpetrating violence. Matheesha echoed Rishen’s comment by telling me that, “As a Government servant and military man, I saw it (crushing the JVP) as a military requirement to be fulfilled”. The justification of torture in these terms appears on the surface to be in keeping with the “banality of evil” theory put forward by Arendt (1994). However, in the narratives we have seen thus far, we find that torture carried powerful meanings, particularly those of an ethical nature, for those who perpetrated it. This rendered the mediation of its memory an exercise that was infused with significant moral claims, particularly concerning accountability for violence and its implications for the self and sociality in the present (see Lambek 1996, Antze 1996).

The moral incomprehensibility of violence perpetrated during the *Bheeshanaya* and the meaning that torture carried for both its ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’, were grounded in issues of ‘intimacy’, as we have seen thus far in this thesis. In the work of remembering then, torture was treated as a live ethical issue that was inextricably entangled in notions of the self and social relationships in the present. In the next chapter we consider how communities wracked by memories of violence go about re-imagining a sense of ‘intimate’ moral community in the aftermath of terror.

Chapter 5

The Possibilities of 'Intimacy' in Times of Terror

The preceding chapters have focussed on the encroachment of violence on social relationships, and the impossibilities of 'intimacy' amidst violence. In this chapter I turn to consider the possibilities of 'intimate' relationships in times of terror. I pay attention here to memories of social relationships that surpassed the violence of the *Bheeshanaya*. Many people remembered incidents involving people who put their own lives at risk to protect that of their neighbours, and were eager to recount these. These accounts were offered as alternative narratives to counter-balance popular perspectives on the Terror, which represents violence as having torn into the social fabric of Sinhala communities, with neighbours 'turning on each other' indiscriminately. Through these narratives, people expressed the ways in which 'intimate' social relationships were maintained amidst violence.

While denial of culpability and hesitance generally marked narratives of violence between 'intimates', people were eager to tell me stories of social relationships that had withstood the pressures of the Terror and even transcended the binaries it created. Interestingly, the narratives featured in this chapter show that people were quick to take responsibility for actively contributing towards community cohesiveness and for upholding the normative moral values expected of 'intimate' relationships. Moreover, we saw in previous chapters that distancing, deflection, and disassociation were frequently drawn on as narrative strategies in recounting 'opportunistic' violence perpetrated between 'intimates'. However, incidents of social relationships that triumphed over violence were situated closer to home, and to the teller. I argue that these stories of 'intimate' relationships that surpassed violence communicated particular ethical values, which contributed to the recreation of a particular moral order. They contained re-imaginings of an 'intimate' community guided by these norms. This shows people's engagement with discomfiting memories of violence to be anchored in the moral, and to entail important implications for the function of 'intimate' communities post-terror.

Mueggler has similarly shown in the context of China, how through stories of wild ghosts, people apportioned responsibility for the violence of the famine experienced during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, creating an

“agonistic sense of community in the face of their own shared responsibility for past violence” (2001: 97). He argues that these narratives of wild ghosts “cleared a space for regeneration of community and searched for an ethical ground on which to remember social relationships devastated by past violence” (2001: 269).

In the context of post-terror southern Sri Lanka, stories of violence perpetrated between ‘intimates’ (particularly that of ‘opportunistic’ violence) similarly allowed people to acknowledge the damaging legacy of the Terror on their ‘intimate’ relationships. They created the space for a moral critique of an incomprehensible past, in a present marked by fear and amnesia. Through the work of narrative, people grappled with the sensitive task of appropriating moral culpability for a violence that was situated uncomfortably ‘close to home’. I argue here that remembering community relationships that had withstood the divisive efforts of terror, and telling empowering stories about their triumph, allowed people to re-imagine a sense of ‘intimate’ community conducive to the continuation of sociality in a post-terror climate, overcast by unsettling memories of un-reconciled violence.

Social Relationships that Triumphed Over Violence

In his work on female survivors of the *Bheeshanaya* based in the South of Sri Lanka, Perera describes the apparent lack of help from neighbours during the Terror as “striking”, and puts it down to fear (1999: 54). In the context of my research, I came across several people who remembered the ties of their own communities as having withstood the pressure put on them by the *Bheeshanaya*. I was told stories of neighbours putting their own lives at risk to protect and help each other. These were empowering narratives because they construed ‘intimate’ social relationships as having triumphed over the challenges posed by violence. The tellers of these stories claimed ownership of their reconstructed past by situating themselves squarely in their narratives. These stories commonly involved their own neighbours, which entailed clear implications for the function of post-terror communities.

Senahami, is an older ex-insurgent who fought in both JVP insurrections, who lives in a small rural village set in the interior. He explains the length that his co-villagers (many of whom were not JVP supporters) went to ensure his protection during the *Bheeshanaya*:

The army, police, and vigilante groups were all after me. They would come at night in jeeps to get me. Do you know *duwa* (daughter), if a vehicle came towards our village someone somehow would get the message to me. Either a child from this village would come running and tell me “*Ayya* (big brother), hide quick, there is a jeep coming to the village”, or a woman in the village would run through a jungle path to get to my house to warn me. I survived because of them. Even now the village is united. Because I have always been good with everyone. I could even go to town sometimes during that time which was a very dangerous thing to do, because the village people protected me. Even today, if you were to ask any of the people in this village where I am, they will say that they don’t know who I am – especially if you are outsider and if they are suspicious of you. Because they don’t want to get me into any sort of trouble. They remember that time.

Senahami communicates values of collective village ties and loyalty to neighbours. He emphasises the moral duty to protect neighbours in the face of ‘external’ threats, even at risk to one’s own survival. For Senahami, the notion of ‘intimacy’ applies to those who live in the same village, and mistrust is reserved for ‘outsiders’. In stating that his neighbours would continue to protect him from ‘outsiders’ and that “even today the village is united”, Senahami stresses the strength of ‘intimate’ relationships to continue long after the Terror, and portrays its very success over violence. He further shows the continuing legacy of past violence on post-terror communities (which entails suspicion of ‘outsiders’ here) by stating that his neighbours still “remember that time”. His dominant memory of the *Bheeshanaya* is that of being offered protection by his neighbours, and this allows him to continue living with them in the aftermath of violence. Senahami partly understands his own survival and that of his community, in terms of his personal commitment to upholding his moral obligations towards neighbours during the Terror.

Let us now turn to the story of Nalaka, who was neither a supporter of the state nor the JVP. He was instead a member of a prominent Left party, whose members were also targeted by the JVP. Nalaka was detained and tortured by state counter-insurrectionary forces based on a malicious denunciation by a UNP political rival. According to him and some of his neighbours, his only ‘crime’ was to maintain relationships with his childhood village friends through the *Bheeshanaya*, including some who had joined the JVP. His narrative illustrates the strain that the *Bheeshanaya*

put on 'intimate' relationships, and like Senahami's story, is an empowering one that portrays village ties having triumphed violence:

I believe I was taken away based on a UNP petition. It was such an injustice. Do you know the police would come looking for me so many times and get all those that live in this village out of their houses and line them up on the street? They would hold their guns to the bellies of the children and get them to identify me. They were not the local police force, they were from outside. So they didn't know what I looked like. They even broke the Buddha statues and our shrine room. They would shout and frighten all these people. But I was good with the villagers, so they never denounced me. They felt sorry for me and used to always try and protect me. They were never angry at me, even for the inconvenience caused to them. They were angry with the police. They now laugh about it and remind me about it. I survived because of them.

Nalaka provides a moral critique of state violence through descriptions of harassment of villagers (including children), encouragement of denunciation among 'intimates', and desecration of sacred property of personal and community value. The destruction of Buddha statues and shrine rooms by state actors in particular symbolises the breaking of moral order and a lack of respect for Buddhist values that are meant to guide community life. The actions of the state here are shown clearly to be morally unjustifiable. Like Senahami, Nalaka emphasises clear moral values, one of which is the primacy of community relationships and the obligation of neighbours to protect each other (even at risk to their own lives). The importance of this value is further stressed by his elaborating that even children, who were held at gunpoint, upheld it.

In pointing out that his neighbours still refer to this violent episode in their conversations with each other, and in acknowledging his gratitude to neighbours for securing his own survival through his story, Nalaka shows the ways in which memories of violence continue to impinge on sociality in the present. Nalaka points to continuing resentment and mistrust of the state as being a legacy of the Terror, and suggests that community ties have been strengthened post-terror in the face of the suffering that 'ordinary' civilians were subjected to at the hands of the state. Through his mediation of memory, Nalaka refashions his traumatic experience into an empowering one, where 'intimate' relationships ultimately succeed the violence unleashed on it by an immoral state. The triumph of village relationships over terror is

illustrated through his reference to people now being able to joke about that traumatic past.

In both narratives above, the Terror is clearly shown to be a threat posed from ‘outside’ to the village community. By emphasising this distinction, the village community is clearly depicted as an ‘intimate’ community governed by certain normative moral values and responsibilities. The threat posed by violence from ‘outside’ was not just a threat to individual survival, but to the survival of the ‘intimate’ community as a whole and to the moral order that underpinned it.

Making Sense of a Violence that ‘Defied Logic’

I argued in Chapter 2, that the incomprehensibility of ‘opportunistic’ violence was grounded in its betrayal of ‘intimate’ relationships, and the favouring of personal interests above that of the ‘intimate’ collective. Through stories of social relationships that surpassed the violence, people also made attempts to make sense of, and attribute some coherence to, an ‘opportunistic’ violence that appeared to “defy logic” (Kalyvas 2006). Several former insurgents put forward explanations based on the relevance of geographic and kinship ties. They argued that revenge and denunciation were more prevalent in urbanised areas, such as towns and cities, as opposed to smaller rural villages. According to this rationalisation, urbanised areas offered the population density and anonymity, with people being guided by ‘individualistic’ values, conducive to the perpetration of such violence. On the other hand, they reasoned, in smaller, less urbanised villages people tended to lead more collective and inter-dependent lives. These people were further more likely to be intimately connected to the village community through historical kinship ties. One former insurgent Vimukthi, who was no longer a member of the JVP, explained the paucity of revenge and denunciation in his village during the *Bheeshanaya*, as follows.

The people in this village were on good terms with each other and united. We are all related to each other. In the next section those people are also related to each other. But beyond that, in town there were problems. The problems occurred in areas where outsiders had come in and settled, and where people lived in flats and didn’t engage much with each other.

According to Vimukthi's explanation, 'intimate' relationships based on long-standing kinship ties linked to the village brought with it a strong sense of 'intimacy' that acted as a barrier to the destructive efforts of violence. Such explanations were used by people like Vimukthi, to reflect their concerns about social issues that impacted on their current lives. Through his narrative above, Vimukthi engages in a critique of modernisation and urbanisation. This is a phenomenon that is perceived by some sections of present-day Sri Lankan society as posing a threat to the traditional and collective way of Sinhala Buddhist community life, organised around the triad of the village (*gama*), temple (*pansala*), and tank (*vāva*). According to this view then, the erosion of traditional normative moral values brought on by modernisation, was partly to blame for the destructive violence that took place between 'intimates' during the *Bheeshanaya*. Re-imagining and re-establishing these moral values through the work of narrative then becomes an important means through which past violence and its devastating impact on community relationships is dealt with post-terror.

The validity of this argument (i.e., that 'opportunistic' violence predominantly occurred in urban areas as opposed to rural areas) is difficult to substantiate due to a lack of evidence and the sensitivity of the subject. It may be worth noting however, that both Nalaka and Senahami (whose stories of community ties transcending the violence of the *Bheeshanaya* we heard above) lived in small villages located in the rural interior, which on the surface of it adds weight to this argument. Nevertheless, I also gathered accounts of revenge and denunciation from people who lived in other such apparently close-knit villages, which suggests that these incidents were not exclusively reserved to urban areas. My own experience in the field suggested that the occurrence of 'opportunistic' violence appeared to follow no discernible pattern related to kinship or geography. It is more likely to have been contingent on local context and on pre-existing social and political dynamics that preceded the Terror. As some scholars have pointed out, we need to know what kind of 'neighbourhood' and 'neighbourliness' existed before the violence (see Esses and Vernon 2008, Hewstone et al. 2008).

The villages in which I carried out my fieldwork were by no means harmonious, collective bubbles. They reflected the complex dynamics that mark all human relationships, and it is highly unlikely that life before the *Bheeshanaya* was one of idyllic non-violence. Violence usually based on an escalation of local

animosities was a marker of everyday life. The state impinged on people's personal lives in violent ways, largely through fear and harassment, and the police were the most common culprits here. Local political actors along with the various gangs of the 'underworld', contributed to the low intensity sense of fear and violence that characterised everyday life for the vast majority of research participants. Spencer (1999) documents the violence that accompanied local party politics at his own field-site in Ratnapura in the early 1980s. Alexander (1995), who carried out research in a fishing village he calls Gahavella, in the southern region over 30 years prior to my time in the field, notes the frequency of everyday violence in his field-site. He comments that in Gahavella "where everyday language sounded aggressive and offensive to other Sinhalese, most villagers lacked a vocabulary to express degrees of anger and even minor disputes could quickly escalate into physical attacks" (Alexander 1995: 254-255).

Many communities in which I carried out my fieldwork were divided by family disputes (most commonly over land), which led to grudges being harboured, sometimes escalating into outright violence. The importance attached to social status among Sinhala families also led to envy in some cases, made particularly acute in settings where people lived in close proximity to each other and one could not avoid having their noses rubbed in the success of their neighbours. Living in an environment in which one was always watched and often talked about could sometimes be suffocating, and the threat of losing both face and status under such close scrutiny and surveillance, loomed constantly.

While former insurgent research participants like Senahami and Nalaka proposed that 'intimacy' (here based on shared kinship and geographical space, generally found in small village communities) acted as a protective barrier against violence, we have also seen thus far in this thesis, that 'intimate' sociality can in fact increase the threat of violence. Kalyvas (2006) refers to 'intimacy' as the "dark face of social capital" and presents numerous examples from Stalinist purges and Mao's China to the US-UK led war in Iraq, to illustrate that most violence in war is carried out by those who know each other, and that 'intimacy' is crucial to civil war. Kelly and Thiranagama similarly argue that intimacy can lie at the foundation of violence, rather than in opposition to it, with those who seem closest evoking the most anxiety and fear (N.d.: 4).

A vivid example of the capacity of 'intimacy' to evoke such fear and uncertainty came in the form of the *gōni billa* (the masked informant) - a spectre that

sent shivers of terror down the spines of ordinary people at the height of the *Bheeshanaya*. While the masked-informant is one that has been used globally in state terror (said to originate in the US), in Sri Lanka its use was negotiated and understood through local idiom. The figure of the *gōni billa* was one that people had grown up with and ‘known’ all their lives. A well-known figure of fear in Sinhala children’s stories, the *gōni billa* is said to carry a gunny-sack and abduct naughty children to eat. Here, the informant masked with a gunny-sack was recognised as this figure of terror, instilling fear not only among children but also adults. His victims (like that of the character in the children’s horror stories) were abducted supposedly for ‘being bad’, never to be seen again. What made the spectre of the *gōni billa* terrifying was this very familiarity and the possibility of her or his ‘intimacy’.

Nevertheless, I also came across many instances where ‘intimacy’ acted to diminish the threat of violence, as we shall see in the narratives that follow. Anthropologists have highlighted the ambivalence of kinship (see Spencer 1999, Obeyesekere 1981, Das 2007). With reference to the Partition in India, Das has illustrated two opposite sides to kinship and intimacy that operated. One involved kin on the Indian side of the border helping victims by giving them shelter and assisting them with employment, while the other entailed a betrayal of trust (2007: 10). My research similarly points to the manifestation of the ambiguous and contradictory nature of ‘intimate’ relationships in times of violence.

Managing Community Cohesiveness

The majority of former insurgents I spoke to suggested that the incidence of revenge and denunciation in their communities was contingent on their own behaviour (in their capacity as insurgents) towards neighbours. While a denial of culpability and avoidance marked narratives on the occurrence of ‘intimate’ violence (as we saw earlier in this thesis), former insurgents readily acknowledged responsibility for its active prevention in their own localities. In doing so, they contributed to the construction of an ethical self through the work of memory. Many ex-insurgents denied that ‘opportunistic’ violence took place within their communities. They put this down to their own conscious and careful management of

‘intimate’ social relationships during the *Bheeshanaya*. They remembered upholding their moral responsibilities to neighbours over and above their obligations to the JVP. In doing so, former insurgents remembered themselves and their role in the violence in positive and moralistic terms.

Consider Shehan’s story below, which in many ways was typical of the rationalisations offered by former insurgents for the occurrence of ‘opportunistic’ violence during the *Bheeshanaya*. He was adamant that his own small village set in the rural interior, did not witness a single incident of ‘opportunistic’ violence during the *Bheeshanaya*. He put this down to the kinship ties that bound his ‘intimate’ community, as well as his own leadership style and efforts to manage community cohesiveness throughout the Terror:

When I was working, I got death lists from my superiors. These lists named the people who they said were opposed to the insurrection and needed to be killed. But I didn’t carry these out. I didn’t allow for anyone in my village to be killed. Because I wouldn’t be able to live amongst these people. I didn’t allow a single person in this village to be killed. I wasn’t denounced by a man from my village. (He) didn’t come from this area. I never harassed people here. I can still go out to these people and ask for their votes representing any party. That’s because at the time I thought long-term, and behaved in an educated way. I was always aware of my responsibility and was accountable to my superior. And even when I had orders from my superiors I sometimes over-rode them to protect my village people.

Shehan represents himself as champion of moral values, going as far as to claim that he defied the orders of his JVP superiors to fulfil his responsibility towards his neighbours, and that in doing so he inhibited the perpetration of ‘intimate’ violence in his village. He emphasises the importance of maintaining one’s obligations to ‘intimates’, which he suggests should override loyalty to one’s political cause. He remembers his own engagement in the insurrection as being grounded in moral values and an abstinence from ethically unjustifiable violence.

Shehan indirectly denigrates ‘opportunistic’ violence as being abhorrent and depicts its perpetrators as lacking morals, (social) education, and foresight. These are characteristics he suggests to be antithetical to his own self-identity, and in doing so he distances himself from this form of violence. Furthermore, by drawing lines of

demarcation between the ‘intimates’ of his village and the ‘outsiders’ responsible for denouncing him, he implies that ‘intimacy’ offers some protection from violence. The moral responsibilities that ‘intimacy’ entails are shown to be reciprocal, with all actors having to adhere to their obligations towards the other.

Through his narrative reconstruction, Shehan exercises some agency over violence that at the time was overwhelming and unmanageable in many ways, thereby rendering its memory and his own entanglement in an unsettling past more tolerable to live with in the present. Shehan further draws links between his past actions and his relationship with his neighbours in the present. He attempts to illustrate the extent of trust neighbours continued to place in him by stating that they would readily lend him political support. This is a significant statement given the post-terror environment of suspicion and fear, shown particularly towards former JVP insurgents by their neighbours. In doing so he lends credibility to his story and adds weight to his self-portrayal of ‘innocence’. Remembering himself in this manner allows him to alter his relationship to the past and to continue living with its memory in the present.

Lal, a former insurgent who participated in both insurrections told me that his neighbours protected him when he was being hunted down by the state during the *Bheeshanaya* precisely because he actively fulfilled his responsibility towards them and contributed to the sustenance of social relationships in his village. He told me:

Even when I was in the JVP I never harassed anyone here. I received orders to get rid of UNP supporters or workers. But I didn’t carry them out in the village here, and I didn’t allow for people to come to harm from the JVP in this village. I didn’t do it because I was going against the party or anti-JVP. But we must know right from wrong, and prevent doing wrong things. If the party wanted me to do something wrong, then I would make the judgement and not do it. That’s why I tell you that I never killed anyone.

Lal portrays himself as having made ethically informed decisions during his tenure as an insurgent. The representation of the self in these narratives shows the importance that former insurgents attach to remembering themselves and their own involvement in a violent past in ways that enable them to live with its memory and consequences in the present. Memories of violence here are shown to be entangled in the continuing

moral construction of self-identity and in the negotiation of sociality with others in the present. Remembering the self in ethical terms is a vital aspect of continuing to live with one's complicity in past violence.

'Intimate' Relationships that Transcended the Binaries of Terror

Many of former insurgents were keen to tell me stories of 'intimate' relationships (between members of the security forces and JVP insurgents) transcending the political binaries that permeated during the *Bheeshanaya*. Many of these narratives featured individual members of the security forces and JVP insurgents who hailed from the same village actively helping and protecting each other from the violence of their respective 'factions' during the *Bheeshanaya*. These stories expressed certain moral values concerning social relationships, and contributed to the overall construction of an alternative memory of the *Bheeshanaya*.

In the course of my fieldwork I frequently came across families with some members who had belonged to the security forces and others who had joined the JVP in the 1980s. This comes as no surprise given that similar factors such as social disadvantage, economic deprivation, and the lack of alternative employment opportunities, drew people into both organisations. Accordingly, I also heard of numerous occasions where kinship ties overrode the political oppositions created by the *Bheeshanaya*, with people in the counter-insurrectionary forces working to ensure the survival of their insurgent kin and vice versa. Some people also told me that the state often delegated counter-insurrectionary violence to paramilitary groups whose members originated from out-with the locality due to the reluctance of soldiers to kill suspected insurgents from their own communities.

Collaboration between some sections of the JVP and the security forces (particularly at the lower ranks) has been acknowledged by some writers, particularly in the smuggling of weapons from the army to the JVP and the passing of state security intelligence to the JVP. This has largely been couched in terms of the JVP's strategy of infiltrating the security forces (see Gunaratna 1990, Chandraprema 1991). I was told that these links were mainly developed at village level – between friends and kin of the same village, involving lower-ranking soldiers and JVP cadres who shared a similar social background. The type of relationship I refer to here is of a

more personal and ‘intimate’ nature - one based on kinship and village ties, rather than a formal military strategy of infiltration and collaboration.

The information I gathered for this research in many instances, strongly attests to ‘intimate’ kinship and village relationships overriding the wider political binaries of the Terror. This remains a silenced aspect of the *Bheeshanaya*, which is commonly depicted in simplistic binary terms framed in macro-level politics, as a conflict between the JVP on the one side, and the state on the other side. My interest here lies in people’s eagerness to remember and emphasise this particular aspect of their experience of violence, which has clear implications for life after terror. In recasting their memories of violence in such a manner, people made them more conducive to the functioning of post-terror sociality.

Such stories further reflected a post-terror context of recall in which members of the security forces were popularly viewed as ‘heroes’ who sacrificed their lives on behalf of the imagined ‘intimate’ Sinhala community. Remembering one’s complicity in perpetrating violence against members of the security forces in this context then was practically and morally unpalatable, and potentially detrimental not only to one’s own image and that of the JVP, but also to social relationships post-terror. The emphasis placed by former insurgents on communicating this alternative memory further reflects a desire to resurrect positive aspects of ‘intimate’ relationships from the *Bheeshanaya*, in an effort to provide a more ‘balanced’ portrayal of southern Sri Lanka’s troubled history.

Dasa, a former insurgent who had a leadership role at village level, hailed from a village that was notorious for revenge and denunciation during the *Bheeshanaya*. Ironically, Dasa told me that while many of his neighbours had denounced him, he had managed to survive the *Bheeshanaya* because of the protection he received from his village friends who were in the security forces. Dasa’s narrative emphasises the strength of ‘intimate’ relationships among young people who grew up together in the same village but followed different ‘political’ paths, with some joining the army, and others the JVP. These ties he remembers as having surpassed the ‘political’ oppositions of the *Bheeshanaya*. His story is particularly interesting because it represents these social relationships as having remained strong in a village that was at another level divided, with neighbours apparently constantly having “petitioned” (informed) the police on him and his JVP brother. His narrative is as follows.

I mainly managed to survive because of the close connections we built with the army. These were internal village relationships. Our friends in the army from this village helped save my life. Our intra-village friendships were strong. On so many occasions JVP insurgents hid in army people's houses when the army was out to get them and they hid in ours, in our village. I was arrested a couple of times and imprisoned. My other brother was a policeman, and he searched for my details and whereabouts and got me out. He did get into some trouble for that. A couple of other times when I was taken in, my army friends managed to get me out. Mostly they gave us information. Once there had been talk in the army about targeting my brother and getting him as he went to visit our sister who was in hospital. I got a phone-call straight away from a friend in the army telling me this, and asking me to be careful. He told me to protect my brother and to tell him not to go to the hospital. Like that there were occasions when I was warned not to go places as well.

In crediting his childhood friends who were members of the state security forces for his survival, Dasa communicates the value of village and friendship ties and the moral responsibilities that this entails. In stating that he too protected them from the violence of the JVP, Dasa further acknowledges his own contribution to upholding the normative values that underpin 'intimate' relationships. His narrative is an empowering one because it shows the strength of friendship ties to have withstood the divisive pressures of violence.

Similarly, Senahami emphasises the responsibility that people have towards their co-villagers. These, he intimates, must supersede one's obligations to 'outsiders'. He highlights the cohesiveness of his own village and remembers his neighbours as having abided by such normative values. Once again, the violence here is depicted as being injected by 'outsiders' who fell out-with the boundaries of the 'intimate' social world of the village. In emphasising the tenacious ties between people who represent polar opposites in the violence of the *Bheeshanaya*, Senahami remembers his community as having withstood the pressures of violence. These memories then create conditions conducive to the smooth functioning of his community post-terror.

We had a lot of support from the army. But then after the poster incident the army went crazy and came after us. But even at that time not all of them did. People don't want to kill others from the same village. Most of the killings were

contracted out to the vigilante and paramilitary groups. The army soldiers used to help their sisters and brothers from the village. I remember if the army were asked to carry out a search operation in the village, they would sometimes fire warning shots from outside the village, pretending that they were shooting a wild animal or some suspect, so that we (insurgents in the village) had time to run into hiding.

In the following narrative, former insurgent Kanchana, further lays emphasis on the strength of ‘intimate’ relationships that defied the acute political opposition that existed between UNP supporters and the JVP during the *Bheeshanaya*. Here the emphasis is placed on friendship ties and the moral responsibilities this entails, as opposed to village ties per se. Kanchana’s depiction of his ‘intimate’ community goes beyond the boundaries of the village, and is built around his network of friends. Kanchana credits his survival to his UNP friends on whom he was completely reliant for his very survival during the *Bheeshanaya*, as he explains below.

Society knew that I was a JVP activist, so I couldn’t go to work. The army and their connected gangs would keep coming to search our house. So I left and went into hiding in various parts of Sri Lanka. I mainly stayed at the houses of UNP friends. They offered me protection. Even though as JVPers we were anti-UNP they looked at me as their friend and knew that we joined the party for political reasons rather than to kill UNPers. They knew that we weren’t going to kill them. I hid in their houses for 4 years. I couldn’t work then. I completely relied on the support of my friends who protected me. JVP supporters also secretly helped us out from an economic aspect by giving us food.

Stories of social relationships that transcended violence served to create an alternative memory of the *Bheeshanaya*, which was more convoluted than its depiction in simplistic binary terms in popular memory. Through these empowering stories, people commented on the possibilities of ‘intimacy’ in situations of terror. They involved the search for an ethical ground to come to terms with the morally unsettling violence of their recent past. People’s ethical engagement with memory here involved attempts at re-imagining an ‘intimate’ moral community after violence. In the next two chapters

we explore the ways in which former insurgents went about trying to recreate their lives and re-inhabit their ‘intimate’ social worlds, in the aftermath of the Terror.

CHAPTER 6

Recreating Life and the Mundane

When they released me from detention I was very happy. I would not be beaten anymore. I would not have to see those same grey walls day in day out. I could go home and see my family. But you know, that happiness only lasted one day [holds up index finger]. That was all. Then I started thinking “what do I do now? How will I live again?”

Ananda smiled ruefully and leaned forward in his worn armchair as he reflected on his release from detention and return home in 1991. He was a small tired-looking man, who looked older than his 48 years. He told me that he had been detained by the state for his involvement in ‘subversive’ activity during the *Bheeshanaya*; more specifically for sourcing weapons for the JVP insurrection. His words took me somewhat by surprise. I was fresh to the field and Ananda was the first former insurgent I interviewed for this research. After listening to his harrowing tale of torture in detention, I naively assumed that freedom would entail uncomplicated happiness, and an opportunity to start life afresh. However, the more people I spoke to about their lives after the *Bheeshanaya*, the more I came to realise that survival for those who had perpetrated violence was “a complicated affair” (Green 1999: 170).

Scholars have shown us the capacity of violence to destroy the ‘normal’ everyday and people’s worlds with it (see Das 2007, Green 1999, Nordstrom 1995, Lawrence 2000). How then do you pick up the pieces of your world and begin to live everyday life again after violence? How can you bear to carry on living with your torturers, with those who denounced you to the authorities, with those *you* victimised, and amidst people who perpetrated violence against your loved ones? How can you re-inhabit this world again (Das 2007) – a world pregnant with violent memories, and come to terms with your own questionable past?

These questions haunted me throughout my time in the field, as I moved through seemingly tranquil and harmonious villages and towns, listening to people’s stories of violence and betrayal, in many instances involving neighbours and people they thought they knew. This chapter is concerned with how ‘retired’ insurgents reformulate their worlds after violence, and explores the very questions posed above

through their narratives. It considers the ways in which people who have perpetrated violence recreate everyday sociality in the aftermath of Sri Lanka's Terror, in a context where 'perpetrators', 'victims', and 'witnesses' must continue living side by side, under the sinister shadow of past violence in fear, silence, and with feigned amnesia.

My research finds that for many of those who have perpetrated violence, rebuilding lives in its aftermath is steeped in the mundane, and focuses on reclamation of an (altered) everyday. The experiences of reformulating lives after violence for those who have engaged in it then bears similarity to that of 'victims' of violence as shown in existing literature (see Green 1999, Das 1990a and 2007, Chatterji and Mehta 2007, Mehta and Chatterji 2001). Moreover, the narratives that feature in this chapter suggest that despite the silence and apparent forgetting on the surface, past violence entangles itself in the present in intricate and complex ways, impacting on the everyday lives of those embroiled in the ongoing exercise of reconstructing their social worlds. Memories of violence continue to linger beneath the everyday, emerging to the surface unexpectedly under the most banal circumstances (see Das 2007). This in itself is a challenge that former insurgents must grapple with in their efforts to reformulate life after terror.

I further argue that former insurgents are active agents who consciously put in place carefully thought out strategies to negotiate social life in a convoluted post-terror environment, and that they draw on various resources to facilitate this exercise. This in many ways resonates with findings from research on 'victims' of violence, which have highlighted their agentive efforts to remake social worlds after violence (see Green 1999, Das 2007). Interestingly, the former insurgents who participated in this research placed an overwhelming emphasis on the practical and material aspects of recreating sociality after terror, as opposed to that of moral reparation. This diverges from arguments put forward by scholars highlighting the crucial necessity of moral reparation in the recovery of social relationships after wrongdoing (see Urban-Walker 2006, Griswald 2007). The 'perpetrators' of violence who participated in this research conveyed through their narratives that life after violence for them was about the pragmatic task of 'getting on with business of living' (with their past).

As mentioned earlier in this thesis, anthropological studies on the *Bheeshanaya* overall are lacking, and have been sidelined in favour of studies on the internecine conflict between the Sri Lankan Government and Tamil militants in the North and East. The few studies that do exist on the *Bheeshanaya* predominantly focus on the experiences of survivors (i.e., ‘victims’ of violence) who lost loved ones to violence, and I briefly review some of this work here. The lived experience of ex-insurgent survivors of violence is a glaring gap in the existing knowledge base on post-terror southern Sri Lanka. Anthropological research on survivors of the *Bheeshanaya* emerged around the mid-1990s and at the turn of the century. Much of this work homes in on the stories of female survivors of the *Bheeshanaya*, raising a whole host of interesting issues. Perera’s work is by far the most extensive here (see Perera 1995, 1998, 1999, 2001). Focussing on the multiple concerns of those women who lost family members to the violence of the *Bheeshanaya*, he highlights issues around harassment and stigma, psychological trauma, problems of escalating poverty, and guilt (1998, 1999). He further looks at the use of spirit possession and popular religion as a socially acceptable means of dealing with experiences of violence in the immediate post-terror environment (2001); and emphasises issues of prolonged justice and desires for revenge in an environment of impunity where ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victims’ must live in close proximity to each other, as well as the social problems related to mourning in the absence of bodies (1995, 2001).

Argenti-Pillen (2003) analyses the discourses of female survivors of violence within the context of spirit possession, contending that ambiguous terms and tactics of avoidance in discourse allow people to distance themselves from the experience of terror. She argues that women reconstruct their worlds and interrupt the cycle of violence through culturally specific narratives based on the belief of *yakku* (the wild) and spirit possession. Her work has been criticised for its “unquestioning faith in ‘tradition’ ” that has clouded her ability to see the detrimental effect that this system of belief and rituals has on women, in terms of constraining and disciplining them (see De Alwis 2004: 105). Argenti-Pillen’s (2003) study also raises some methodological and ethical problems, mainly concerning trust, anonymity and confidentiality. For example, she breaches consent when she publishes a transcript that details an experience that her research participant has asked her specifically to omit from the final written text. Not only is the narrative detailed at length, but also included is the request by the research participant, “Don’t write this down...if they happen to see your book they will say that we told you. If they see your book, they

would be angry again. We don't need those things now" (2003: 58). In another instance, a photograph of a research participant has directly beneath it a quote from her interview, which relates the picture to her narrative, thereby raising concerns for anonymity, confidentiality, and the safety of research participants, given the sensitive nature of the subject (2003: 133).

When we consider anthropological studies on the aftermath of violence in South Asia overall, we find valuable and thought-provoking studies on Tamil survivors of violence in Sri Lanka (Kanapathipillai 1990), Sikh survivors of the 1984 Delhi riots and survivors of the Partition in India (Das 2007), survivors of the Bombay riots (Chatterji and Mehta 2007), and survivors of Hindu-Muslim violence in Hyderabad in 1990 (Kakar 1996) to name just a few. These studies have thrown up important findings on how survivors of violence remake their lives in the aftermath, and on the nature of the post-violence environment itself. Scholars have emphasised the intimate relationship between violence, fear, and silence that permeates long after the actual violent event, and further of the absorption of past violence into the ordinary and everyday, post-terror. As Das eloquently puts it, past violence "attaches itself to the ordinary as if there were tentacles that reach out from the everyday and anchor the event to it" (2007: 7). 'Victims' of violence, have further been shown to recreate their everyday lives through a descent into the everyday, which in itself is an act of agency, despite our tendency to think of agency as an escape from the ordinary (Das 2007: 4). My research on the experiences of 'perpetrators' of violence post-terror, found many parallels with that of 'victims' as highlighted in existing studies, as we shall see through the course of this chapter. In the existing literature on the aftermath of violence in South Asia overall too we see that the experiences of those who have engaged in violence have been overlooked in preference for survival stories of 'victims' of violence.⁴⁰ This chapter then provides a fresh and important perspective to knowledge on reconstructing everyday life after violence.

Returning Home

⁴⁰ Das (2007) while not directly carrying out research with those responsible for violence against Sikhs in the 1984 Delhi riots, nevertheless attempts to understand what drove their violence. Kakar's (1996) work on the aftermath of the Hindu-Muslim riots in Hyderabad includes the views of some who directly engaged in the violence. However, neither of these studies pays focussed attention to the experiences of 'perpetrators' in the aftermath of violence, nor of how they recreate their lives. Das's interest is placed squarely on 'victims' of the 1984 Delhi riots and the Partition, while Kakar focuses more on the psychological foundations of inter-ethnic violence, exploring issues such as Hindu-Muslim identity, religious stereotyping, and ethnocentric histories.

Before moving on to consider ex-insurgents' narratives of their return home from detention or hiding, let us take a brief look back at the nature of the immediate post-terror environment that awaited their return.⁴¹ By 1991, the insurrection had been brutally crushed by the state almost as suddenly as it had begun, at the cost of tens of thousands of lives, and the JVP as a political movement had been practically decimated.⁴² The Government still led by the UNP, now turned its full attention to fighting the war with the LTTE, which continued to rage in the North and East, and to grapple with an economy that had been dealt a severe blow by both insurrections (in the North led by the LTTE, and in the South by the JVP). Many of the communities that insurgents were returning to were fractured by violence, loss, and betrayal. In the absence of justice and any formal reconciliation, 'victims', 'perpetrators', and 'witnesses' were forcibly "locked within the necessity of cohabitation" (Soyinka 2004: 475). The spaces that people had to share with their denouncers, torturers, and their victims, were pregnant with memories of terror and betrayal.

Perera's (2001) work on how ordinary people coped with terror is situated in the immediate aftermath of the *Bheeshanaya*. It is largely based on local newspaper reports from the early 1990s recounting stories of supernatural activity and ghostly sightings emanating from spaces where specific acts of violence took place during the Terror. We thereby see that spaces of violent death were clearly marked by the community. We are told of one young man suffering shock after seeing a frightening ghostly black dog with fireball eyes standing on its hind legs at the specific place in which four bodies were set on fire (2001: 172). Further, both a guesthouse and a library that had functioned as torture chambers during the *Bheeshanaya* also reported supernatural activity, such as screams through the night and books being thrown about by unseen forces (2001: 173). Perera argues this to be an expression of the desire for justice, and part of communities' own "healing" mechanism in the aftermath of terror. In many ways, this situation reflects the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward and famine in China as set out by Mueggler (2001). He has similarly shown ghost stories featuring those who died, to voice demands for justice and express ideas of revenge post-violence. In the wake of the *Bheeshanaya* too, persistent haunting memories worked against the silence and amnesia that surrounded the violence.

⁴¹ The vast majority of young people, particularly from the rural areas, spent months and even years in hiding at the height of the *Bheeshanaya* through fear of abduction or detention, while others were detained by the state.

⁴² All but one member of the JVP politburo had been murdered by counter-insurrectionary forces. The JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera was killed by UNP Government forces in 1989. Somawansa Amarasingha was the only member of the original JVP leadership to survive, having evaded capture and going into exile in the UK. He returned to Sri Lanka in 2001 to take up leadership of the revamped JVP that was now in the political mainstream.

While Perera's work was situated in the immediate wake of the Terror, my research was carried out nearly 20 years after the *Bheeshanaya*. I did not come across any stories of supernatural activity harking back to that era. In her aptly titled edited work *Ghosts of Memory*, Carsten has argued that ghostly sightings and strange hauntings signify people's sense of connection to the past, reflecting "losses that are excessive, or circumstances in which those who bear them are not resigned to giving up their attachments" (2007: 13). This explanation may help shed some light on the context of this research. During my time in the field, I came across stories of a different kind also emanating from the *Bheeshanaya* and carrying powerful undertones of moral justice and accountability for violence. These were stories framed in the Buddhist ethical framework of *karma* that featured clearly identified wrongdoers suffering the negative consequences of their past actions in the aftermath of the Terror. They will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. For our purposes here, drawing on Carsten's argument we may assume the dissipation of ghost stories to result from the passage of time and the gradual changes in the process of grieving that this brings. In one sense, it signifies a sense of 'letting go' of attachments. However, in another sense, the prevalence of karmic stories that appear to have replaced the ghost stories that marked the immediate wake of the *Bheeshanaya*, reflect the continuing legacy of trauma and signify an un-reconciled past. Moreover, it highlights the powerful impact that memories of violence have on the present everyday, and suggests a deep-seated, lingering desire for justice and revenge. Nevertheless, the post-terror environment I worked in did share some similarities with the immediate one in which Perera's work is located, particularly in terms of the permeation of fear and silence, of past memories lurking beneath the surface of everyday life, and of suppressed animosity and desires for revenge in the absence of justice or reconciliation.

What was an insurgent, fresh from months or sometimes years in hiding or detention, to do? And how was he to live again (to borrow the words of the former insurgent Ananda, who opened this chapter)? Ananda's statement reflects the ambiguous thoughts and emotions that accompanied many insurgents in the early days of their return home. I was often told by former insurgents reflecting on this particular experience, that the initial feelings of euphoria at being set free soon gave way to the harsh reality of the task of rebuilding their lives, that lay ahead of them. For many returning ex-insurgents like Ananda, facing the enormity of their recent experiences, concern about the reaction of their communities, along with pragmatic

worries about the future, were aspects of this harsh reality that they were now left with. Some men were returning to young wives and small children that they had been separated from, and with this came an acknowledgement of the suffering that their families had endured due to their absence. The stark realisation of the impact of violence on their education, career prospects, and social standing (due to the stigma attached to the now discredited JVP), among other things, made the future seem somewhat bleak and the task that lay ahead of them, enormous.

Getting a Job

Rebuilding livelihoods was generally emphasised by former insurgents as being the first step in the exercise of rebuilding lives after violence. However, in the immediate aftermath of the *Bheeshanaya* many remembered the stigma attached to the JVP insurgent as posing an obstacle here with its potential to frighten off prospective employers. Large gaps in employment history (due to time spent in hiding or detention) also caused suspicion among recruiters. The reaction of some former insurgents to what they saw as the continual negative impact of the *Bheeshanaya* on their livelihoods and futures was evident during my fieldwork. On separate occasions, I had agreed to assist two ex-insurgent friends in writing up their CVs. They were both desperate to find employment in the Middle East due to the dire economic situation in Sri Lanka (particularly the lack of employment opportunities and unbearable cost of living). Both got visibly upset and frustrated as we struggled to fill in the glaring time-gaps in the ‘career history’ sections of their CV when we came to the years covering their time in detention and hiding.

The majority of former insurgents I spoke to lamented what they saw as the destruction or disruption of their education, and with it their future prospects (e.g., career and social status prospects) due to the *Bheeshanaya*. They claimed that the *Bheeshanaya* continued to plague them throughout their lives and depicted it as having the power to restructure their present and future. Many former insurgents had clear imaginings of alternative futures for themselves, in the absence of past violence. Almost all of those ex-insurgents who had not received a university education told me that one would have automatically followed, resulting in successful white-collar jobs, accompanied by a higher social status and material comfort - possibly in a Western ‘developed’ country. “I wouldn’t then have to live this life of suffering and poverty”;

“I would have a good job in an A/C (air-conditioned) office and be earning a big salary if I had been able to finish school and get my degree”; and “I would be living abroad by now”, were common statements (extracted from various interviews) of missed opportunities and alternative futures imagined by former insurgents continuing to grapple with rebuilding lives and livelihoods after violence. Ex-insurgents then portrayed the experience of violence as having restructured their lives and altered the flow of time and future.

In depicting the *Bheeshanaya* as a life-shaping event and by using it to explain developments in their later life, former insurgents demonstrated the significant meaning and power they attached to this event. Many identified the *Bheeshanaya* as the root cause of their failure to reach certain social and material aspirations in life, and used it as a lens through which to understand their everyday lives after violence. Loizos in his study on the forced migration of Greek Cypriots, reflects on a similar question about the consequences of one severe event (i.e., displacement) and its disruption of people’s “steady state assumptions” (2008: 118), on the social lives of his research participants. He surmises that while the question is easy to pose, it is impossible to answer (2008: 132).

Shehan is a former insurgent who left the JVP in disillusionment shortly after his release from detention. While appearing excessively confident and ‘tough’ on the outside, on the inside Shehan seemed depressed and constantly blamed his involvement in the JVP for the economic difficulties he endured in the present. He frequently talked about where his life would have been had it not been for his involvement in the JVP during the *Bheeshanaya*. His narrative extract below illustrates the immediate concerns of newly returned insurgents in the wake of the *Bheeshanaya*. It further shows us how they went about the business of getting a job as that all important first step in rebuilding their lives. His narrative overall is tinged with a sense of injustice and regret, at having been ‘cheated’ out of a promising future:

When I came back I had problems. Mainly about finding a job. I couldn’t think of what to do. My education had been disrupted (*kaḍā kappal*). So ... I went through a relative to get a job as a parking warden. I told them my background, but it wasn’t a problem for them because the boss was a cousin and knew me from the village. I was in that job for two years. I then wrote a letter to Brig. Ajith (the Commanding Officer of his rehabilitation centre) explaining that due

to my detention my education had been destroyed and asked him please to find me a stable job... So then he put me forward for the army. I passed all the interviews and the medical test. I was offered a position but ... I couldn't take it...My wife didn't like me going for it. So I missed that opportunity. After that I felt I couldn't go back and ask him for help since I hadn't taken up the position he had given me. My experiences from the *Bheeshanaya* have had a huge effect on my life. If not for that I could have continued my education and been in a permanent job. I could have gone places in society. Later when I tried to get a job at Y (organisation) they asked me to get a certificate from the police. The letter they (police) gave me said that I was detained for being involved in JVP activity and that I was now free. I got really upset at that. It's a huge problem for me. It is an obstacle (*bādakaya*) to getting work.

Shehan's story gives us an insight into how former insurgents manoeuvred their way through obstacles that lay in the path of rebuilding livelihoods in the immediate aftermath of the *Bheeshanaya*. His narrative blends the past with the present, and shows his experiences of the *Bheeshanaya* to entail significant consequences for his present and future life. He attaches powerful meaning to his violent past and blames it for his failure to meet specific social and material goals in life. As Loizos (2008: 132) has pointed out with reference to his own research participants, it would be impossible to predict whether Shehan's life would have been any different if it had not been for the *Bheeshanaya*. Indeed, to do so would involve fruitless attempts at 'fortune-telling' on my part, and is not of relevance to this study. But, we may safely assume that barriers to achieving his aspirations, posed by social and economic discrimination (some of the very issues that formed the basis of the JVP's revolutionary platform) would have remained for Shehan to grapple with even in the absence of the *Bheeshanaya*. That his violent experiences undoubtedly intensified these challenges in many ways is indisputable. Past violence is represented here as casting a dark shadow over the present, and as being experienced through the everyday. Like many other former insurgents, Shehan draws on his experience of the *Bheeshanaya* to comprehend and give meaning to the unfolding of his life overall.

Shehan's expectations of time and the future are shown to have been significantly disrupted by violence, and he perceives the impact of past violence on his life as continuing. When Shehan faces difficulty in finding work, his kin come to his assistance and provide him with employment, accepting him unconditionally, regardless of his past. The strength of kinship ties featured throughout the narratives on the *Bheeshanaya*. In the preceding chapter, we saw the capacity for kinship ties to

transcend the binaries created by the Terror, and in Chapter 3 we saw the crucial role that families played in supporting those in detention. There were also instances where families were torn apart by violence and betrayal. Nevertheless, for some like Shehan, kin proved to be a vital source of support in the process of reconstructing lives, particularly in the early days.

The sense of regret and injustice that runs through his narrative is made clear when he expresses upset at having to get a reference letter for employers from the police, establishing his past. This letter attaches the label of ‘insurgent’ (with its accompanying stigma), bringing the past into the present and impeding the new life that he is trying to build. His upset suggests that he wished his life after the *Bheeshanaya* to be a new chapter, separated from a past that he wanted to leave behind. For Shehan then, rebuilding life with the shadow of his murky past hanging over him is a continual process. Following his work as a parking warden and a stint in farm labour, he moved on to work at a small local shop, which he felt offered better pay and prospects. However, this career was brought to an abrupt end when the shop was destroyed by the Asian Tsunami in 2004. Having struggled to find suitable employment after this, he resorted to borrowing heavily to pay a hefty sum to a dubious local travel agent and headed off to work in the Middle East.

It is interesting that Shehan turned to the Commanding Officer of his rehabilitation centre for assistance in finding employment in the early days of his return to the village, and that the former offered him employment. This apparent irony of former insurgents seeking assistance from those who detained them is not unusual. Kirihami, whose story features below, also turned to the counter-insurrectionary officer who ran the detention centre in which he was tortured. He says that upon being released from detention and handed back to his family:

Major Mahinda (Commanding Officer of his detention centre) gave us his card with his phone number. He told us to call him any time, and that if ever we were in trouble he will help us. He also told us to stay out of trouble, to not get involved in these kinds of things... In school I had done an army training programme. So I knew about the army. The two of us who were taken to the camp got together with two other boys from the neighbouring village and called Major Mahinda, and explained (to him) that we would like to join the army. At the end of 1989 when the JVP was coming to an end, we joined the army. I had the capabilities to go in at Officer rank. But I joined as a normal soldier. Now

looking back, I think I joined the army as a means of saving myself from the problems of the *Bheeshanaya*... In 1991 the JVP party was totally finished.

Kirihami pragmatically considers his options in the wake of the *Bheeshanaya* and decides upon a career in the security forces, based on his familiarity with the army through a training programme he followed at school. For this Kirihami then turns to his torturer for assistance with rebuilding his livelihood and with his help goes on to join the army. He creates a new career for himself with the death of his old one - signified here with the decimation of the JVP. By telling me of his capacity to “go in at Officer rank”, Kirihami attempts to project a particular picture of the ‘JVP insurgent’ - one with skills and capabilities, willing to position himself at the bottom rung of the career ladder in order to work his way up through sheer hard work. This image defies the negative stereotype of the JVP insurgent in the environment in which he lived. This stereotype largely saw the kinds of people who became JVP insurgents as ‘uneducated’, ‘country-bumpkins’ (*gamē godē*), and ‘good for nothings’ who went on the rampage, inflated by ‘the power of the gun’.

Kirihami says that he joined the army to “save himself” from the “problems” of the *Bheeshanaya*. He told me elsewhere that various local JVP leaders were trying to make contact with him following his release from detention, in a bid to persuade him to re-join efforts to fight the counter-insurrection. This had proved somewhat tempting, but also threatened his very survival and relationship with his family, which was by now closely monitoring his behaviour in a bid to prevent him from falling in with insurgents once again. Proactively seeking work in the army then was a means through which Kirihami could cut ties with the JVP and his past therein, as well as an opportunity to recreate his life. However, this did not mean that he was leaving behind his past experiences of violence. Kirihami understood this career move to be an important step not only in recreating a life for himself, but also as his salvation. His story featuring the compassionate counter-insurrectionary officer makes us reflect on the need to abstain from passing hasty moral judgements on those who perpetrate violence, and on the capacity of human beings to show both brutality and compassion in situations of extreme violence (see Browning 2001, Levi 1988).

Re-building Social Relationships and Dealing with Stigma

Along with economic problems and the challenges of rebuilding livelihoods, restoring their relationship with the community was one of the most significant concerns expressed by former insurgents. Their relationship with, and place in, their communities in many ways lay at the foundation of reconstructing their worlds. Suspicion, secret animosity, and fear were legacies of the *Bheeshanaya* that severed the ties that held communities together. As we saw in Chapter 2, neighbours denouncing each other to either the JVP or state security forces often on the basis of petty squabbles, opportunists exploiting the climate of terror for their own ends, and people exacting violence against their neighbours, all had to live together. Former insurgents then were often returning to share the same, small awkward spaces with their denouncers and torturers, and those against whom they themselves had perpetrated violence. The long-term destruction of community ties and sociality is a consequence of violence that has been highlighted in much of the research on ‘victims’ of violence (see Kakar 1996, Das 2007, Chatterji and Mehta 2007, Mehta and Chatterji 2001). Mehta and Chatterji contend that what remains of violence is a “multiplicity of fractured communities” each charting their way through their own strategies of survival (2001: 202). The narratives in this chapter show individual ex-insurgents to exercise considerable agency in devising their own strategies to rebuild sociality after violence within their fractured communities. What is striking about these accounts is the emphasis former insurgents place on practical repair, as opposed to acts of moral reparation.

The community reception of returning JVP insurgents varied, depending on context, and factors such as the severity and dynamics of violence in the locality (and the behaviour of local JVP insurgents during the *Bheeshanaya*). I was told of instances where rejection by the community was so severe as to force ex-insurgents out of their home communities altogether, while others found this process to be somewhat more successful. The majority of former insurgents told me stories involving efforts on their parts to rebuild social relationships. Consider the case of Kanchana, a former insurgent who spent many years in hiding. Kanchana told me that upon returning to his home village he went back to his career as a sports instructor. This extract from Kanchana’s interview shows the kinds of practical strategies that former insurgents put into action in order to re-seal fractured relationships within their communities.

With my return to the village I left the JVP. Some people in the village looked at me with animosity (*vapara*). Others didn't react either way. And those who supported the JVP treated me like a hero...When I came back (to the village) from the very beginning I actively took steps to alleviate people's fear of me and any bad opinion they had of my character. When I came back I quickly built friendly (*suhada*) relationships with people and helped them. I spoke well to everyone. When I saw people from my village standing outside the sports complex I would make the effort to go up to them...to show them around ...and would help them out... I would give them a discount, or just take whatever they offered me (for coaching their children). When I was coaching I would make a special effort to be nice to my students, especially those whose parents were wary of me. I would call them "*duwa*" (daughter) "*putā*" (son), because then I knew that they would go home and tell their parents that I am a good person. So I took action from the very start. Even UNP supporters in my village started sending their children to me [laughs].

Upon returning to his village, Kanchana actively sets about re-creating a new life for himself. He leaves the JVP, reclaims his career, and puts in place a well-thought out strategy to rebuild social relationships and trust damaged by violence. The reconstruction of community relationships is pivotal to his efforts to remake his life after terror. He makes attempts to change community perceptions of him from violent insurgent to helpful, upstanding member of the community. He is well aware of the long-lasting damage done to community relationships and his own reputation as a result of violence, and realises the effort needed on his part to repair this damage and regain the trust of his neighbours, even at cost to himself (e.g., foregoing full payment for his services).

The extent to which he has consciously thought through his strategy to recreate social relationships in his community is evident in his statement, "I would make a special effort to be nice to my students. Especially those whose parents were wary of me. I would call them '*duwa*' (daughter), '*putā*' (son) because I knew that they would go home and tell their parents that I am a good person". In the aftermath of Terror, Kanchana then saw himself as an active agent who put in place proactive strategies to recreate sociality after violence, exploiting the resources that he had at hand. His efforts to rebuild his life after terror are focussed on the pragmatic. They entail practical and material acts of repair. This was a feature that was evident across the narratives of former insurgents.

In the narrative below, Prema (another former insurgent) echoes Kanchana's efforts in carving out a public and practical role for himself in his home community, situated here in the communal realm of village societies and the temple, rather than seeking forgiveness or making amends. Prema is an old ex-insurgent farmer who remained a JVP supporter during the time of his participation in this research. During the *Bheeshanaya*, Prema was detained and tortured for several years by the state. In his narrative below, Prema sheds more light on the concerns that newly returned insurgents were faced with, in particular on the challenge of earning acceptance of one's community. This is his story on returning home from detention.

When I came back to the village after 2 years it was a big change for me. It was a new environment even for me, because I had been away so long. I didn't really have community related problems because ...I had also helped people in the village. But I had significant economic problems. One or two people looked at me with animosity (*vapara*), like I was some new strange animal (*amutu satek*) in the village. But ... I started getting involved in village societies and temple activity then I slowly started engaging with people again. So there were no major problems there. But I had major economic and personal problems. I had a small child and a new wife who were left behind with no means of livelihood. Also, my wife was new to my village and wasn't familiar with the people or the environment. She struggled to bring up our daughter in those days. I had some paddy fields that she sold. Also, my father had died just days before I was taken away ... So my main problems were economic problems. I still had some paddy lands left and returned to farming.

Prema's story is located in the mundane and pragmatic, and his work to reformulate life after violence features the personal and the family, as well as his village community. He talks about his economic problems, concerns for his family, and reception by his community, highlighting the multiple challenges facing those who returned home in the aftermath of terror. Return to his family brings with it an acknowledgment of the impact of his incarceration on them and immediate practical concerns about economically supporting his family. The need to find work is urgent, and he goes for the option that is available and familiar to him from before the insurrection, which is rice farming.

Prema's story in many ways reflects Kelly's (2008) findings on his research concerning West Bank Palestinians' search for the mundane and ordinary during the

violence of the second Intifada. Kelly argues that this search for the ordinary amidst conflict emerged from a “practical engagement with the obligations of kinship, and the desire to produce and provide for their families” (2008: 371). In a similar vein we find that Prema’s focus on the mundane and practical (in this case after violence) also appears to have emanated from pragmatic concerns about unreconciled obligations to provide for himself and his family. Similar to the West Bank Palestinians featured in Kelly’s research then, for Prema his search for the ordinary illustrated “an inherently ethical attempt to [re]inhabit the world” (2008: 371).

For Prema, having to face up to these new and urgent responsibilities is coupled with having to manage neighbours’ perceptions of him and the challenges of resealing ties with his village community. That his neighbours gawped at him as though he was some “strange animal” suggests hostility, and he goes on to say that some expressed outright animosity towards him. But he gets involved in community affairs and in the work of the village Buddhist temple. These offer socially acceptable means through which to interact with neighbours and to claim a position in his community. The Buddhist temple is important here, as it provides a safe environment in which to rebuild relationships with neighbours again, and his acceptance by the temple automatically sets the precedent for acceptance by the village. Through a demonstration of community-spirit and of dedication to the spiritual life of the village, he makes inroads into being accepted once again by those in his village. He went on to tell me that he was now on good terms with everyone in his community, but that his work in the village was continual. This was something I witnessed myself. Our interview was constantly interrupted by various people from the village coming into his house to seek advice about village-related issues, such as local religious events.⁴³ However, it is important to note here, that the social relationships that people like Prema rebuilt, and the everyday they reclaimed, were not the same as that before the *Bheeshanaya*. The everyday that was ‘reclaimed’ after violence by former insurgents was an altered one, based on new meanings, memories of loss, and new forms of knowledge (see Das 2007, Chatterji and Mehta 2007, Mehta and Chatterji 2001).

The majority of former insurgents told me that their reception from the local community was mixed. A common statement was that some people had looked to them as heroes (*vīrayō*) while others would look at them with animosity (*vapara*). Some withdrew from the community altogether, while others like Prema and Kanchana put in place carefully thought out practical strategies to meet these

⁴³ During such interruptions I would change topic and pretend that I was carrying out a study on rural farming practices.

challenges head on and to rebuild relationships with their respective communities. Sometimes, these strategies failed to bring about the desired result. Kirihami, an ex-insurgent who had broken all contact with the JVP soon after his release from detention, also told me of proactive efforts to rebuild sociality and carve out a space for himself in his home community. His strategy involved throwing himself into village youth activities and taking on a leadership role therein, in a bid to rebuild his life. His narrative is interesting in that it shows the process of reconstructing life after violence to be ongoing and continuous, and the mundane realm in which he anchored it to be fragile and continually touched by past violence (see Kelly 2008).

I soon began to realise that young people (in the village) were not turning up for my (youth) meetings. When I finally questioned some of them (about this), they were embarrassed and said that their families did not allow them to come because they didn't like them having any involvement with me. I decided at that point to resign. If people think like that then they don't want my services. Since then the societal belief (*samāja mathaya*) is that I am still a '*JVP kāraya*'⁴⁴ – mainly among the older generation. This really struck me again recently. A few weeks ago I went with my wife to the bank. A man who knows me from my village saw me and said 'Ah...this is the *JVP kāraya* isn't it! (*Ah mē JVP kāraya nē!*). [Looks upset and stares into the distance]. It's been 20 years since the period of chaos (*kalabala kālaya*). I haven't been a (JVP) party member or worked for the party (since then). I am stunned (*pudumai*) that people still think of me like that. I was not hurt but I decidedly told myself such is the mental development of people here still. (So) like that I have experienced a few incidents of despair after the period of chaos.

Local youth affairs may not have been the wisest choice of vehicle through which to endear oneself to neighbours, given the negative connotations around 'youth' during the *Bheeshanaya*. The restrictions placed by parents in his village on their children regarding their attendance of his youth events give us a sense of the sheer extent of mistrust and animosity that permeated community relationships in the wake of the Terror. Memories of past violence, and the fear, animosity, and suspicion they entail linger beneath the surface of the everyday for years, even decades, creeping into mundane social interactions when least expected, such as a chance meeting outside the local bank. Despite the silence and apparent forgetting on the surface, the

⁴⁴ *Karaya* is a derogatory term that refers to 'person'

behaviour of Kirihami's neighbours towards him suggests that people (particularly those who lived through the Terror) continue to feel anger at having to live with those they perceive to have 'blood on their hands', and shows the importance attached to remembering the violent past. It further shows the ways in which memories of past violence continue to inflect and shape everyday sociality in the present. In the absence of appropriate justice and reconciliation, people draw on whatever means available to them to punish 'wrongdoers' (e.g., through ostracism, derogatory name-calling).

Kirihami's neighbour still refers to Kirihami as "*JVP kāraya*" almost twenty years on from the *Bheeshanaya*. The *Bheeshanaya* retrenched the identity of the insurgent - the "*JVP kāraya*", and this label is one, which proves difficult to shake off. Kirihami's narrative illustrates the stigma attached to the JVP insurgent and the power of accompanying negative labels, that continued to haunt the former insurgent years after the Terror. That the stigma and label are difficult to shake off is understood by Kirihami, and (as I could see) clearly continue to cause him upset, despite him telling me that he did not feel hurt by the slight. Dealing with such obstacles is part of the continuous work he must do in reconstructing the everyday after terror. Just as in the early days following the *Bheeshanaya* he dealt with the village boycott of his youth work through withdrawal by resignation, here he consoles himself by philosophising on the (lack of) intelligence of his neighbours. These psychological and physical strategies are tools he uses to negotiate life after terror.

Memories of violence had the power to keep communities divided long after the Terror. For some ex-insurgents, rejection from the community was so severe as to make life within it unbearable, forcing them to move out of the community altogether. Consider the story of Nikhil, a former JVP insurgent leader who is now a lawyer. Nikhil spent several years being tortured in detention. When he returned to his village, he was met with intense hostility due to his role in the insurgency. As well as giving us a glimpse into the factors that fuelled ordinary people's animosity towards insurgents returning to live with them, Nikhil's narrative also shows us the ways in which ex-insurgents then managed such animosity and negotiated their way through challenges posed by the community.

Without a doubt the village people looked at me with animosity. Particularly the families of those who had been killed. They thought, "our son, our brother died, and you lived". And their upset is justified. The families of those boys felt that I

as a leader survived, and they blamed me for their deaths. I didn't know that I would survive. If I knew that they would die, I would never have led them into that. I couldn't stay in the village for a long time. They didn't let me. They ostracised me (*pilihul kalā*), and on many occasions reduced me to tears... So I had to move from the village and came here... Now all that is forgotten and there is no problem. Our people forget easily... Even now people from my own village don't give me their (legal) cases. No person who did 1980s JVP was ever treated as a hero when they came back to the village. But in my mind I was a hero. Even if no one else thinks I am. No one appreciated what we did, not even our own party. No one thinks about the sacrifices we made, how I was forced to live in hiding, how I sacrificed my education, and how I spent time in prison, all for the benefit of the country. Even our party leaders don't care. Now you get wrongdoers living freely (*vāradikaruvō nidāllē hāsirenavā*). But there are no problems about people like that living among others in the villages. All that is forgotten.

Nikhil's narrative is littered with contradictions and reflects the imperfect nature of memory. It shows how violent memories continue to haunt and divide communities, beneath the veneer of silence and amnesia. These memories allow space for secret grudges and desires for revenge to be harboured. When Nikhil returns to his village, he comes face to face with the sense of injustice that members of his community feel at having those they perceive as wrongdoers, roaming free. Despite Nikhil believing that he paid penance by spending time in prison (detention), his neighbours beg to differ, and in their eyes justice has not been done. Their desire for retribution leads them to mete out their own form of punishment, directed at those they perceive to be responsible for violence against their loved ones. In the absence of appropriate official justice, ordinary members of the community draw on whatever means available to punish transgressors in their own communities – in this case by ostracising Nikhil to the extent of forcing him out of the community altogether.

In his narrative, Nikhil attempts to downplay the power of memories of violence and their impact on social relationships. Contrary to the evidence that surrounds him, Nikhil tells me (and seems to want to believe) that people have forgotten the *Bheeshanaya* (and presumably his own actions therein), and that things are back to 'normal' as before the Terror. However, almost in the same breath he contradicts this statement by saying that members of his natal community still refuse to give him their legal cases. He also later told me that he feels unable to visit his natal village due to hostility from neighbours and some members of his family, because of his involvement in insurrectionary activity. This shows the capacity of

memories of past violence to disrupt sociality in the present. Almost two decades after the *Bheeshanaya* then, despite silence and apparent forgetting on the surface, ordinary people seem keen to ensure that its memory is kept alive in ethical terms, and that ‘wrongdoers’ are held to account.

Nikhil rejects moral responsibility for violence by emphasising the altruistic and selfless motives that apparently underpinned his actions. His denial could be interpreted as a form of self-consolation and an important aspect of remembering the self in moral terms. It is a survival strategy that he uses to continue his work of reconstruction, uninterrupted by discomfiting memories of his own complicity in unethical acts.

Nikhil represented himself as a devout Buddhist, and as we shall see in the next chapter, he rationalised and made sense of his violent past through a framework of Buddhist ethics. Here, he appears to implicitly draw on the notion of intent that precedes one’s volitional act, which is afforded prominence in Buddhist ethical philosophy, to deal with the issue of moral accountability for violence. According to Buddhist ethical tradition, the moral value of an action and thereby the karmic consequences (negative or positive) that follow are dependent on the intent of the agent. As Gethin explains it, “the only criterion for judging whether an act is ‘moral’ (*kusala*) or ‘immoral’ (*akusala*) in ...Buddhist thought is the intention that motivates it” (2004: 167). Nikhil intimates that because his motivations were altruistic his actions cannot be construed as immoral. This is a means through which he rejects moral responsibility for past violence. Through this interpretation of Buddhist ethics, Nikhil then communicates his ‘innocence’, which in turn implies the irrelevance of engaging in acts of moral repair after terror. However, this runs contrary to the implicit acknowledgement of moral responsibility that former insurgents (including Nikhil himself, as we shall see in the next chapter) engaged in, through claims they made about suffering the negative karmic consequences of their past actions in their present lives. For our purposes here it is interesting to note how Nikhil draws on Buddhist ethics to reconstruct his past and deal with issues of culpability in the aftermath of violence.

By telling me about his altruistic motives and the sacrifices that he as an insurgent made “for the benefit of the country”, he also engages in a particular moral representation of the kind of JVP insurgent he was. Nikhil refashions the ‘JVP insurgent’ as a selfless martyr, acting with the altruistic aims of benefiting all of mankind. Through this reconstruction, he attempts to counter the negative stereotype

of the JVP insurgent. It is ironic that Nikhil grumbles that “wrongdoers” roam free. He clearly does not perceive himself as having been one, despite the reaction towards him by members of his community suggesting otherwise.

Nikhil’s story of alienation from one’s home community was not an isolated case. Dasa, another former insurgent who had since left the JVP, had been a local leader during the Terror. He complained to me that he continued to face hostility from his neighbours. Upon his return from hiding Dasa decided to withdraw from community life into the security of his home and family, while still physically living in his home village. His attempts at rebuilding his life after terror were shaped by memories of betrayal by neighbours who had readily denounced him to the counter-insurrectionary forces during the *Bheeshanaya*, and by feelings of being surrounded by those he mistrusted. Dasa told me that as a result of the actions of those in his community during the *Bheeshanaya* and their attitude towards him in its aftermath, he now avoided non-essential interaction with neighbours, and refused to participate in village events such as funerals, weddings, and temple rituals. His physical and psychological withdrawal from community life was symbolically illustrated by the large concrete wall that he had built around his house, which separated his space from that of the community. This was indeed a strange sight in a seemingly close-knit village, where people and their yards seemed to spill into each other.

The continuing animosity of his neighbours and their desires for retribution fuelled by memories of past violence, threw obstacles in the path of Dasa’s project to reclaim his everyday life. During my time in the field, I came across malicious rumours pertaining to the *Bheeshanaya* and clearly intended for the ears of Dasa and his family, that were being circulated in his village. These rumours suggested that Dasa’s brother Kollu, an unpopular JVP insurrectionary who was disappeared during the *Bheeshanaya*, had been spotted ‘living it up’ in Europe.⁴⁵ Dasa was clearly distressed by the stories, and incessantly questioned why they were being circulated, whether there was any truth in them, and why if Kollu was in fact living comfortably in Europe, he had not bothered to contact his family. He told me at one point during our conversation with a troubled expression on his face:

⁴⁵ The country in which Kollu was apparently ‘living it up’ varied according to the rumours.

We don't believe this. He would have been in touch with me or at least written a letter to my mother ... [looks upset and somewhat stunned, repeats this sentence a couple of times]... I don't know why people would say something like this. He was close to my mother. She cried everyday for him until the day she died. He would have sent her a letter at least.

The circulation of such malicious rumours shows us the ways in which violent memories continue to shape community relationships in the present. The past merges with, and is experienced through, the everyday present. Its memory continues to affect former insurgents' projects of reconstruction. Dasa's manner of traversing this disruption to his ongoing work of remaking life is to withdraw further from his community into the safety of the domestic realm. In marked contrast to Dasa's and Nikhil's experiences of life back in the community, stands Shehan, who lives in a small village in the rural interior.

When I came back I didn't have a problem with the village people because most of them had visited me in the camp (rehabilitation centre). I was accepted by them. Most of the people in my village are my relatives, so there wasn't a problem. Some may have thought of me as a dangerous (*darunu*) person, but they didn't show it to me. No one from my village denounced me (*pavāḍunna*) ... I didn't do unjust (*asādāraṇa*) things to them... We were not fighting against the society or village people. Our fight was against the Government.

Shehan acknowledges his own actions in the past to have paved the way for his present positive relationship with his community. However, it is important not to downplay the strength of kinship in supporting the process of reintegrating into communities after violence. Kinship ties formed the basis of community cohesiveness in Shehan's village. He told me that his family lineage tying him to his village went back generations. Practically everyone in his small village, he told me, was related to him in some manner through "blood or marriage". Kinship then played an important role in helping Shehan to reformulate his life after the Terror. As well as supporting him through detention (as we saw in Chapter 3) and assisting him in rebuilding his livelihood, his family facilitated his seamless reintegration to the community by accepting him whole-heartedly (despite some reservations).

We see in Shehan's story an attempt to reconstruct the past and in a sense to 'set the record straight' on the *Bheeshanaya*. While the official narrative and collective memory of the *Bheeshanaya* in general holds the view that JVP violence was directed at the Sinhala community as a whole, Shehan here wants to emphasise that the insurgents' 'fight' was with an unjust Government, as opposed to ordinary Sinhala people. As well as being a means of rejecting moral accountability for violence, through these narratives, former insurgents were also engaging in a reworking of the past and a refashioning of the self. This in itself was an important element of their efforts to come to terms with past violence, and part of their ongoing work overall to reconstruct worlds after violence.

Practical or Moral Repair after Terror?

The carefully devised strategies that former insurgents (such as Kanchana, Nikhil, Kirihami and Prema) put in place focussed on carving out a role in the public and impersonal social realm (e.g., taking up prominent positions in temple and village societies). Personal attempts at ethical repair, such as apologising for past violence, seeking forgiveness, and making amends, are notable for their absence in ex-insurgents' narratives. The pragmatic aspects of 'getting on' with living life after wrongdoing are apparently perceived by those who have perpetrated violence, as being of more importance and relevance to recreating sociality in the aftermath, than that of moral repair.

This appears to diverge from arguments put forward by some scholars, which offer moral reparation a central position in the restoration of social relationships after wrongdoing. Griswald identifies the act of forgiveness as "indispensible" in a "world torn by wrongdoing" (2007: epilogue). Similarly, Urban-Walker (2006) highlights the importance of repairing moral relationships through the creation or re-establishment of hope and trust after wrongdoing. She construes hope and trust (damaged by wrongdoing) to be individual and social necessities (2006: 42) that give meaning to life, and thereby purports the moral recovery of relationships to be "an unavoidable human task" (2006: 6). She further goes on to contend that it falls to the wrongdoer to make amends, and that this process should entail an acknowledgment of responsibility for wrongdoing, and reparative gestures to redress the wrong.

For moral reparation to take place, relevant actors must take ownership of such identifiable categories as ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victim’, which is not possible in post-*Bheeshanaya* Sri Lanka where people on the ground reject such mutually exclusive categories and where the boundaries between them collapse into each other. If we were to apply Urban-Walker’s (2006) conditions for making amends to the context of the *Bheeshanaya*, former insurgents would be expected to identify themselves as ‘perpetrators’, accept moral responsibility for their actions, express repentance, and engage in specific acts of ethical repair to redress their past misdemeanours. However, former insurgents refuse to perceive themselves as ‘wrongdoers’ and have instead consistently positioned themselves as ‘victims’ in their narratives, which allows them to distance themselves from, and reject culpability for, past violence. As a result we find that the basic conditions necessary to facilitate the process of moral reparation after the *Bheeshanaya* are lacking in the context of post-terror Sri Lanka (see Urban-Walker 2006, Griswald 2007)

Such a situation also raises questions as to whether it is fair of us to expect former insurgents to repent and make amends, when they do not see themselves as having engaged in wrongdoing. Their innocence has been conveyed through a variety of narrative strategies employed, from denial, deflection, avoidance and distancing, to representation of the self in terms of victimhood and the moral. In the politically and ethically charged post-*Bheeshanaya* context, where a myriad of alternative histories compete with each other for ‘truth’ value, and where boundaries between ‘victim’, and ‘perpetrator’ remain fuzzy, a straightforward application of moral reparation is not an easy task.

Wilburn further builds on Urban-Walker’s argument by stressing that there must be a commitment from the wrongdoer to improve their character and avoid repeating the wrong (2007: 4). In the chapter that follows, we come across enthusiastic expressions of Buddhist piety in the narratives of former insurgents, and portrayals of the self in terms of living virtuous lives after the *Bheeshanaya*. In one sense we may interpret this newfound commitment to living an ethical Buddhist life as a sign of reassurance framed in terms of a reformed moral character. This signifies a sense of moral discomfort with their past, or at least an acknowledgment of the need for some form of ethical reparation in the exercise of rebuilding life after violence. However, at the same time it may also serve as a narrative mechanism for asserting a discontinuity of self-identity and thereby a means through which ex-insurgents distance themselves from violence they may have committed in the past. What former

insurgents seem to be telling us through their stories here, is that rebuilding life after terror is about the pragmatic work of ‘getting on with the business of living’ with ones past. It is an ongoing exercise that does not necessarily entail a reliance on grand moral tropes and the personal catharsis that this may offer.

Living with ‘Grasses’ in Silence and Forgetfulness

Silence in the wake of violence fulfils various purposes. Green has argued that Mayan widows of violence in Guatemala used silence as a survival strategy post-terror (Green 1999), while in the aftermath of the Partition in India it offered protection to women who had been violated, enabling their communities to accept them once again (Das 2007: 54). There was something surreal about the unwillingness of people to talk about or openly remember the *Bheeshanaya*, the tranquillity on the surface of communities that had suffered horrendous violence, and the nonchalant dismissal of this event in ordinary conversations. In their work on the aftermath of the Hindu-Muslim riots in Bombay, Mehta and Chatterji similarly comment on an everyday present that is moulded through “zones of silence” (2001: 228). My research found that while silence automatically stifled open remembering of the *Bheeshanaya*, it did not necessarily follow that silence equated a real forgetting of past violence (or forgiveness for that matter). Instead, this silence and apparent amnesia on the surface operated as a means of enabling people from various opposing sides to carry on living together. Ordinary people often told me that the *Bheeshanaya* was now forgotten, and that there was “no point in remembering those things now”. This suggests an underlying general assumption that no positive benefit could be derived from openly remembering past violence.

However, with time, trust, and further probing, I came to realise that the violence of the *Bheeshanaya* was indeed far from forgotten. Memories of past violence lingered beneath the surface of the everyday; taking various forms, such as hidden animosity, grudges nursed in secrecy, quiet suspicion, and suppressed desires for revenge. As we saw in the case of Kirihami earlier in this chapter, past violence has the capacity to rear its head unexpectedly and impact on sociality, under the most banal circumstances. This, I have suggested, is a challenge that those former ‘perpetrators’ of violence engaged in rebuilding sociality and reclaiming the everyday, must continually negotiate. These findings complement what Das came

across in her work on ‘victims’ of the Partition in India, where memories of the event had the capacity to “suddenly present themselves without any notice” (2007: 11).

In the case of post-terror southern Sri Lanka, the silence and forgetfulness surrounding this subject had a protective quality to it. It seemed as though it was “dangerous to remember”, as one female survivor of the Partition told Das (2007: 54). By denying, claiming to forget, and staying silent, people who were surrounded by those ‘perpetrators’ of violence, by their ‘victims’, and by denouncers, were protecting themselves. But at the same time they were also protecting the social fabric of their communities. Justice has been described as “the first condition of humanity” (Soyinka 2004: 476) and in its absence, silence and forgetting allowed for ‘perpetrators’ of violence, opportunists, and denouncers, to reintegrate into their communities. In this sense, the silence and memory of the *Bheeshanaya* was also agential. People chose what they said and what they withheld, and what they openly remembered and appeared to forget, in order to protect themselves and to allow everyday community life to continue after the Terror. In other words, silence and forgetting as well as being influenced by fear and trauma, constituted a pragmatic survival mechanism that enabled people to live with their ‘enemies’ (in the absence of an alternative) and permitted individuals to carry on with the exercise of reconstructing their worlds after terror.

Many people told me that forgetting past violence was necessary in order to live after violence. Nevertheless, it was clear from the large number of conversations I had with people that the memories of betrayal and suffering inflicted on themselves, their loved ones and communities, could not be easily forgotten nor forgiven, and that they had to be lived with instead. Rajitha, an entrepreneur, highlights the role that forgetting and silence plays in enabling communities to function in the aftermath of terror. Rajitha’s village suffered a high incidence of insurrectionary violence and many ordinary villagers with no political affiliation like himself, found themselves caught between state violence and that of the JVP. His story illustrates what it was like for ordinary people to have to make room for the return of insurgents to their communities and to carry on living with them. It is interesting to note that at the beginning of our conversation Rajitha claimed dismissively that the *Bheeshanaya* was “now forgotten” and that people lived together in “unity” (*ekamutu*). It was only after some probing that he came out with the story below.

People haven't forgotten what happened. They have a lot of anger underneath (*hita yaṭa taraha*). They don't show it. How can we forget those things? In my area they (the JVP) burned buses, the post office, and killed our GA (government agent). Then in the night they came and forced everyone in the village to go on an anti-government rally the next day (*pelapāli*)... We were terrified, but had no choice. They ...told all the householders except the old and the sick to turn up the next day for the protest or they would kill us... We had JVP boys holding guns to our backs and pushing us forward from behind. And ... we had the army and police firing tear gas at us from the front... All of us were innocent people caught in the middle. And then army trucks came to pick up the protestors, and we started running for our lives. . I remember seeing women with their children running madly all over, and people kept falling and injuring themselves but they still carried on running. How can we forget those things? People know who killed their relatives, and they keep that anger inside. Any opportunity they get they will take revenge... But they can't talk about it... We know who they (former JVP insurgents) are in our village. I don't personally engage with them. They hang out in the same crowd with the other JVP boys from that time. In the Bheeshanaya people could go straight to the army camp and get revenge that way. But now that Bheeshanaya is over we can't do that. We have to live with each other. People have to keep their anger (*vairaya*) inside. A few might come to terms with their anger. They may go to temple and listen to sermons (*bhāna*). ... But a lot of people also go to take revenge at the *dēvāle* (shrine to deities or gods).

Rajitha's voice had a very present quality to it. It felt as though he were recounting incidents in such detail from two weeks before, rather than from two decades earlier. This suggests that the memories of violence and betrayal were still raw and at the forefront of ordinary life, rather than being long forgotten. Rajitha clearly affirms the necessity of silence and suppression of animosity to enable opposing sides to carry on living together after violence when he says, "We have to live with each other". Beneath the thin veil of tranquillity, the foundations of communities damaged by violence continue to remain fragile, and community ties are saturated with suspicion, desires for revenge, and animosity emanating from past violence.

As we saw in Chapter 2, a climate of terror provides an opportunity for ordinary people to delegate violence to political actors (see Kalyvas 2006) and this is clearly recognised by Rajitha. In a post-terror environment such opportunities are scarce and people must resort to alternative means to manage their anger and hurt. He points to the use of the spirit religion here (e.g., exacting revenge via deities) by some to manage the remnants of past violence in a climate of silence and superficial forgetting. This has already been researched elsewhere (see Perera 2001, Argenti-

Pillen 2003). Rajitha further briefly mentions that some people may draw on Buddhist teaching as a means of reconciling past violence.

Former insurgents often had to negotiate everyday sociality with memories of past violence and betrayals hanging over them. The initial reluctance of many former insurgents to speak to me about their experiences during the *Bheeshanaya*, they later told me, was partly due to fear of repercussions from their torturers and denouncers amidst whom they lived. Breaking the silence and openly remembering past violence, it would seem, posed a threat to life after terror. One ex-detainee (who was not involved in the JVP but detained and tortured on a malicious denunciation by a work colleague) told me about how he regularly bumped into his torturer as he went about his daily business in his home town. When I asked him how he reacted to these chance encounters, his response after an uncomfortable pause was that he put his head down and walked on past them. He was careful however, not to do so in a manner that may offend the person in question. Many people had to devise various strategies to continue sharing the same spaces as their ‘opponents’ in a post-terror environment.

Let’s turn to the story of Tilak, an ex-insurgent farmer who was tortured and detained for several years. He was denounced by his neighbour who lived just a few doors away from him. Tilak told me that he experienced a bout of depression when he returned home from detention, but that this lifted when he threw himself into re-organising the JVP. He continues to be an active supporter of the JVP. His story of living with his denouncer is as follows.

You know, it was someone from *my own* [his emphasis] village who grassed me up (*pavāduṇṇā*). I know who it is [abrupt, awkward pause]. He still lives here. But I think then, if I wasn’t caught I wouldn’t have learned all the things I know today about injustice. He did me wrong (*eyā maṭa vairayak keruwē*), and I think if that is good for him, then it is good for me. I learned all that I did in prison (detention)...He is now old. I’m very friendly (*suhada*) with his children. It’s because we learned forbearance (*ivasīma*) from our experiences (during the *Bheeshanaya*) that I don’t have anger (*vairaya*) towards him ... I took the correct path because of what I went through. So let him live as he likes, and I continue to live, as I like. The village accepts me, and the villagers know what type of a person I am and what type of a person he is. If there is any event in the village, like a wedding or funeral, I am at the forefront organising it. I am constantly put forward by the village to represent it at various things and committees... It’s got to the stage where they just put me forward for everything. So he knows that – he sees it. He didn’t ask for forgiveness. At first I felt anger towards him when I initially returned to the village. But later when I

got involved in (JVP) party work that (anger) went away. Now they (the village community) realise that he did something bad to me, and I never retaliated.

Tilak puts in place a two-pronged strategy to meet the challenges posed by past violence to his present efforts to reclaim everyday life. This strategy encompasses a psychological aspect involving efforts to understand and give meaning to his violent past through a focus on the positive outcomes of his experience in detention. And a material aspect wherein he goes about taking proactive and practical steps to carve out a public role for himself in the community in a very visible manner. Interestingly, like the cases we discussed earlier, his strategy is focussed entirely on the pragmatic elements of recreating sociality, as opposed to acts of moral repair.

Tilak's story conveys his innocence. He clearly identifies himself as the victim here, and focuses on the wrongdoing of his denouncer, rather than reflecting on his own involvement in the perpetration of violence.⁴⁶ He feels that as the victim, he should be the object, rather than the agent, of moral reparation (i.e., forgiveness) here. Urban-Walker (2006) has argued that wrongdoing damages trust in a relationship, which one seeks to rebuild through an act of moral repair such as forgiveness. The sense of anger and betrayal that Tilak feels at being denounced by a neighbour and 'intimate' was evident in the body language that accompanied his first sentence, "Someone from my *own* village ... grassed me up". This statement illustrates the "intuitive tie between forgiveness and the moral anger one feels at being unjustly treated" that Griswald refers to (Griswald 2007: 39). Griswald construes forgiveness as a virtue in the ethical scheme of our imperfect world, which entails moral reciprocity. He identifies several conditions that are necessary for the 'victim' to dispense forgiveness. These include that the wrongdoer acknowledges responsibility for the wrong, that she or he repudiates the deed, and that she or he expresses regret for it, all of which are dependent on memory and 'truth'. In a post-terror environment such as that of southern Sri Lanka, where blurred boundaries and denial render the clear identification of 'wrongdoers' and their 'victims' impossible, and where memory and 'truth' remain contested fields charged with powerful ethical and political claims, which in turn elicit competing and diverse 'truths', such models of moral repair are problematic.

⁴⁶ Tilak was detained on murder charges, which he denied to me.

Tilak is aware that expressing anger at his denouncer or exacting revenge is not appropriate in the post-terror climate. He is also aware that he has no choice but to carry on living with him. Ironically, it is one of the skills that he developed in detention (i.e., forbearance) that he puts into use in his life after violence to deal with the challenge of living with his denouncer. Throwing himself into re-organising the JVP gives him a sense of purpose and is an important component of his project to reformulate his life after terror. In his efforts to rebuild relationships with his community, he follows the path of many other newly returned insurgents. He puts energy into involvement in community events and apparently wins approval from his neighbours for his efforts.

Tilak is conscious that his denouncer is aware of the important part he plays in the community and the community's acceptance of him. According to his story, Tilak has also succeeded in showing the rest of the community that he is above holding grudges and taking revenge. This in itself is sufficient retribution. In emphasising his close relationship with his denouncer's children, he communicates that the violence of the *Bheeshanaya* has not passed down generations, and that he will not hold his denouncer's children responsible for the actions of their father. Tilak's efforts to portray his moral character after violence may in one sense imply some form of moral reparation, or at least an acknowledgement of a morally discomfiting past. His life in the aftermath of violence then has been an exercise of drawing on various resources and putting into place pragmatic strategies to reclaim his (altered) place in the community, to come to terms with past violence and betrayal, and to carry on living with his 'enemies' from that past.

Immersion in the Mundane and the Ordinary

For many ex-insurgents, as we have seen so far in this chapter, reformulating life after terror was about the mundane and pragmatic business of the everyday – getting a job, supporting your family, interacting again with your neighbours, getting involved in community life, and learning to live with your enemies. However, we have also seen how violence remains entangled in the ordinary long after the 'violent event', lingering continuously beneath a veneer of silence and forgetting, emerging to the surface of everyday sociality unexpectedly under the most banal circumstances (see Das 2007). This "mutual absorption of violence and the ordinary" (Das 2007: 2)

is evident in studies set in the context of post-violence (see Das 2007, Chatterji and Mehta 2007, Mehta and Chatterji 2001, Green 1999).

For ex-insurgents, the experience of violence and in particular the sense of being close to death (as discussed in Chapter 3), also brought with it a renewed appreciation for the mundane and ordinary in the aftermath. Mundane domesticity for some became the locus of their efforts to reconstruct worlds after violence. This is an instance where parallels can be drawn between the experiences of those who have perpetrated violence and those ‘victims’ of violence as found in existing literature. Das has shown how a “descent into the ordinary” provides an agentive means through which victims of violence recover their lives in the aftermath (2007: 7). The everyday reclaimed through an immersion in the mundane is one shaped by memories of loss and betrayal, marked by new meanings and new forms of knowledge (see Das 2007, Chatterji and Mehta 2007, Mehta and Chatterji 2001).

During the *Bheeshanaya* Nikhil, the former insurgent we heard from earlier, spent over a year in hiding, taking on various false identities and moving constantly to avoid detection. He was ultimately captured by counter-insurrectionary officers and subjected to several months in detention where he was tortured. His story shows the important place that the mundane occupies in the lives of those reconstructing their social worlds after terror.

While in hiding I used to feel sad (*duka*) when I saw young couples walking together. Because I never thought that I would ever get the opportunity to find a girlfriend and experience love. I used to watch people sweeping their yards and feel sad. Because I felt that I wouldn’t live long enough to experience the contentment of that myself. So it was a deep depression (*dāḍi kalakirīmak*) that set in. In my mind I always knew that I would die. But I would comfort myself (*hita hadāgatta*) by believing that I would at least live today before I die...Now I have a beautiful wife and children. My wife is from a poor family, but she is beautiful. Now I do my house chores, painting, gardening, and cleaning the toilet, with great appreciation. Now it is a form of happiness (*truptiya*) for me. Unlike someone who complains about it because they haven’t been in a situation where these things were taken away from them. Do you like gardening? I spend a lot of time doing gardening now. I do it very happily. And I always want to do the chores in the house. I sweep my yard everyday and spend time doing it.

Nikhil's narrative is steeped in the domestic world. As we saw earlier in this chapter, Nikhil faced rejection and ostracism from his home community, which may explain his retreat into the domestic environment. After the chaos, uncertainty, and fear of the *Bheeshanaya*, and rejection by his community in its aftermath, the domestic realm perhaps provides Nikhil a comforting sense of security, familiarity, and 'normality'. Similarly, female survivors' testimonies to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission have been shown to utilise domestic tropes. Ross contends that domesticity here is used "to mark a world relatively ordered and predictable, where kinship relationships have a degree of coherence, and time flows predictably" (2003a: 264). For similar reasons, Nikhil chooses to anchor the work of rebuilding his world after violence in the ordinary domestic realm. It is a realm in which his family features strongly, on whose trust and support he relies.

Kelly (2008) has argued that for those living amidst violence, ordinariness entails hopes and aspirations. It can reflect "a hope to live in an 'ordinary state', where life was benevolently mundane" (2008: 365). Former insurgents had to go about recreating their lives in the face of a traumatic and morally unsettling past, and in a post-terror context of continuing fear, suspicion, hostility, and impunity, where people of various opposing sides were forced to carry on living with each other. In such a situation, it is understandable that for people like Nikhil, seeking out the ordinary and the familiar also expressed such an aspiration to live a "benevolently mundane" life beyond violence in a post-terror reality that in many ways was far from 'peaceful' or 'ordinary'.

The reformulation of life in the realm of the mundane was overshadowed by past violence. Nikhil's narrative shows the prevalence of the past in the present, and he depicts memories of violence as having the power to shape lives in aftermath. These memories are continually negotiated and lived with in the process of rebuilding life after violence. His experiences in detention and hiding, particularly the uncertainty of his own life, along with restrictions on engaging in normal activities that we would take for granted (e.g., sweeping the yard, involvement in romance), brings about a renewed appreciation of the mundane in his life after the Terror. His absorption in ordinary domestic rituals is taken up with vigour, and is an important tool that he consciously draws on in his endeavour to reclaim the everyday after terror, which continues to be influenced by past violence.

From the former insurgents' stories that we have heard so far, it is evident that efforts to rebuild life beyond violence are anchored in the pragmatic and mundane, but that this is a realm overshadowed by powerful memories of a violent past. These memories remain ethically charged, and the exercise of recreating worlds after violence for the majority of former insurgents involve attempts to traverse the morally discomfiting issues that these memories raise, often in the most banal everyday situations. This explains people's constant efforts to allocate moral responsibility for violence and to restore a sense of justice and moral community in the aftermath. All the former insurgents I interviewed for the purposes of this research (except one) drew on religion to mediate their memories of violence and to make sense of the moral issues raised in the aftermath. We shall now turn to look at this in some detail in the final chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 7

Buddhism and Reformulating Life after Terror

In the previous chapter I argued that rebuilding life after violence for ‘perpetrators’ was steeped in the mundane and focussed on the pragmatic. However, during my time in the field I also found a significant aspect of reformulating life for ex-insurgents was that of giving meaning to their violent pasts in ways that allowed them to continue living with its memory in the present. My research found this exercise to be firmly anchored in religion, with nearly all former insurgents I spoke to using their own interpretations of Buddhism for this purpose.

In the narratives featured in this chapter we see how former insurgents drew on Buddhist ethics to understand, and come to terms with, the violence of their past. Significantly, the Buddhist notion of *karma* (the natural law of cause and effect) is employed in their efforts to grapple with the sensitive task of appropriating moral responsibility for violence, and to communicate notions of justice and retribution. As we have seen throughout this thesis, denial of moral culpability has been a characteristic feature of narratives belonging to former insurgents. However, I argue here that the Buddhist ethical framework of *karma* provides a means through which some moral accountability for violence perpetrated during the Terror is implicitly acknowledged. But in another sense, *karma* also functions as redemptive discourse in people’s ambiguous narratives, as a means of excusing ‘perpetrators’ of violence from the task of engaging in personal acts of moral repair.

The overwhelming majority of people I spoke to also told me elaborate stories situated firmly within a karmic framework, which featured ‘wrongdoers’ suffering the terrible consequences of their immoral actions during the Terror, in the present. I argue that such stories, which draw on moral karmic tropes express re-imaginings of a moral order destroyed by violence. They convey people’s continuing desire for justice in a post-terror context of impunity where formal justice and reparation are severely lacking. Buddhism overall provides people with an ethics to come to terms with the violence of their past (see Mueggler 2001).

Buddhism further functions as a coping mechanism in the absence of formal psycho-social interventions. In post-terror Guatemala, Green (1999) shows how renewed religiosity shapes the survival of Mayan widows in a context of continuing fear. There, Evangelism operates as a survival strategy for these Mayan women and helps them to deal with the social and psychological effects of violence in its

aftermath. Perera (1995, 1998, 2001) and Argenti-Pillen (2003) demonstrate the use of the spirit-religion by ‘victims’ of the *Bheeshanaya* as a psychological coping-mechanism. In the stories that run through this chapter, we also find expressions of renewed religiousness and efforts by former insurgents to represent themselves as living virtuous Buddhist lives after terror. On the one hand, this conveys reassurances of a reformed moral character, which we may interpret as a step towards moral reparation and an implicit acknowledgement of wrongdoing. On the other hand, however, former insurgents also appear to use this as a narrative strategy to assert a discontinuity of self-identity and to distance themselves from their past violence, which amounts to a rejection of culpability. We find then, that Buddhism plays an important but complex role (particularly concerning the appropriation of moral responsibility for violence) in the ambiguous and contradictory narratives belonging to ‘perpetrators’ of violence in the reformulation of life after terror.

As this thesis draws to a close, we take an overall look at how former insurgents reflect on their violent deeds, considering whether guilt or remorse play a part in their engagement with memory. Finally, this thesis argues that the work of reconstructing worlds after terror, for those who have participated in violence, is a continuous and ongoing exercise steeped in the moral. It is a learning process in coming to terms and continuing to live with past violence in the present, rather than an exercise in ‘moving on’ from or ‘getting over’ violence. People continue to keep memories of violence alive in ethical terms, with ongoing efforts to allocate moral responsibility for violence in the aftermath. The allocation of accountability is a process that is constantly in flux and often contradictory. It is an issue that continues to remain morally un-reconciled. This then forms an integral aspect of the reality of life after violence for ‘perpetrators’.

Understanding Present Life through *Karma*

According to Buddhist philosophy, *karma* is the natural law of cause and effect that applies to all living beings. Gombrich describes *karma* as “the foundation of the Sinhalese view of causation and the way in which the universe functions” (1971: 144). He provides the following useful delineation of *karma*.

Karma means ‘deed’ or ‘act’. Strictly speaking your *karma* is what you do, not what is done to you – that is the maturation (*vipāka*) of your *karma*, the result of one of your previous acts in this or one of your former lives. *Karma* is a doctrine of free will. Indeed, will is paramount: the doctrine is that what counts is the intention, not the effect. ‘It is intention (*cētanā*) that I call *karma*’ said the Buddha. (Gombrich 1971: 145)

This explanation highlights the important connotations of intention and personal responsibility that *karma* carries according to Buddhist doctrine. Rather than being fatalistic, *karma* puts individuals (through their intentional actions) in charge of their own destiny. As Obeyesekere puts it, *karma* “places responsibility for each individual’s present fate quite squarely on the individual himself” (Obeyesekere 1968: 21). Keyes comments that Buddhists find karmic ideas meaningful when they are faced with “the ultimate conditions of existence”, as it gives “explanations for human misfortune” (1983: 3). My research finds that *karma* provided a powerful ethical framework through which people made sense of a morally incomprehensible past. People drew on *karma* as a system of meaning to make connections between past violence and its continuing life-shaping influence in the present. This demonstrated the significance and meaning that people attached to the violence of the *Bheeshanaya*.

Former insurgents’ stories of negotiating life after terror were located squarely within this Buddhist ethical framework, and through it they attempted to allocate moral responsibility for violence perpetrated during the Terror. As we have seen throughout this thesis, former insurgents employed a range of narrative strategies to reject moral responsibility for past violence. Interestingly however, in their narratives on reformulating life after terror, many drew on the concept of *karma* to implicitly acknowledge some moral culpability for violence during the *Bheeshanaya*. Several former insurgents explained the trials and tribulations they suffered in their present lives in terms of the negative karmic consequences resulting from their past wrongful actions. This highlights the ambiguous and contradictory nature of their narratives, and suggests that those who have perpetrated violence continue to live with both the acknowledgement and denial of moral responsibility for their actions.

At another level, however, ‘perpetrators’ appeared to use *karma* as a redemptive discourse, which allowed them to avoid engaging in acts of moral repair after violence. By explaining that they were already being made to suffer the negative

karmic consequences of their past actions, former insurgents intimated that there was no further need to make amends with others in the exercise of recreating sociality post-terror.

Shehan, a former insurgent who no longer supports the JVP, told me that he regretted his involvement in the insurrection. This was because he now understood through Buddhism, that he engaged in wrongful actions during the *Bheeshanaya* thereby accumulating bad *karma*, the effects of which he was experiencing in his present life. He regularly complained to me that the poverty and hardship he faced in life was due to the karmic consequences of his wrongful actions during the insurrection. He confided that he had threatened people at gun-point, destroyed public property, and extorted for the JVP - specific wrongful actions, which he believed explained his suffering today. However, on the other hand, he told me that he had not died in detention despite the significant torture he endured, because he had abstained from what he considered to be more serious immoral acts, such as murder.

Here, Shehan acknowledges some moral responsibility for violence during the *Bheeshanaya* through the utilisation of *karma*. He further illustrates the significant meaning he attaches to his experiences of violence, in showing its power to continue shaping his life in the present. Shehan in one sense may be engaging in a redemptive discourse through his use of *karma* here. By telling us that he is already paying penance for past violence, he appears to excuse himself from the need to engage in specific acts of moral reparation.

In his work on survivors of the *Bheeshanaya* who lost loved ones to violence, Perera (2001) shows how people understood their experiences of violence in terms of *karma*, set within the wider context of popular Buddhism. For example, we are told the story of Sumanapala, a man who frames the massacre of his wife and four children along with the destruction of his house, in Buddhist karmic philosophy. Sumanapala explains this massacre to be the result of bad *karma* accumulated by the wrongful actions of his dead family in a past life, wherein his wife and children had tortured a family of birds in a nest and then set the birds and their nest on fire. This was apparently revealed to him by a deity that possessed his surviving daughter (Perera 2001: 179-181). The former insurgents who participated in this research were overwhelmingly cynical about spirit-possession and to an extent popular Buddhism. However, they understood the natural moral law of *karma* overall to impact on their own lives, in accordance with Buddhist teaching.

Exerting Control Over *Karma*

Obeyesekere states that while in Buddhism *karma* is recognised as the cause of all fortune, “in the context of day to day behaviour the *karma* theory of causation presents logical problems which arise from ordinary human social and personal needs” (1968: 20). Among these is the uncertainty that the psychologically indeterminate nature of *karma* brings - “I cannot know what the future holds in store because I do not know what my past sins and good actions have been” (1968: 21). Bearing this in mind, let us now turn to consider Kirihami, a former insurgent who attempts to bring about a sense of certainty to his *karma*.

Kirihami is a staunch Buddhist and told me that he practices meditation daily and reads Buddhist texts. We may remember from before that upon being released from detention, he was given a job in the armed forces by the Commanding Officer of his detention centre. Kirihami acknowledges the necessity of violence as a practical human reality, and structures his ideas of ‘being a good Buddhist’ around this. He told me (in a sardonic tone) that both the JVP and the army wanted him to do the same thing – to kill people: the only difference being that killing by the army was validated by law. His narrative is coloured with Buddhist teachings rooted in the natural law of karmic cause and effect, and with southern cultural idioms. Through his story, Kirihami communicates specific virtues he deems necessary for leading a moral life after violence.

I know I have no *pav* (bad karma resulting from wrongful/immoral action)... I shot people in the army but every time I did it I kept thinking may no *pav* happen to me as a result of this (*maṭa pavak sidda novēvā*) and then pulled the trigger. So I know that I have no *pav*... So I have been saved... I got involved in the JVP because of my youthfulness (*tarunakama*). But I did not harm society. Or it was a minimal form of harm (*avama hāniyak*)... Now if I had killed a lot of people at that time (*Bheeshanaya*), I would not be here today. This became very clear to me because of a particular incident. When I was held in the torture chamber (*vadakāgāraya*), there was a really hard hearted/minded (*tada hita*) soldier. He used to do terrible things, really torture people and kill, and he would get drunk at night. He gave us very severe beatings. A few years later when I myself was an army soldier, we were called up to a Muslim village in the east...(because) the Tigers had decapitated 105 Muslims there... When we got there, the LTTE started attacking us. Amidst all that, I saw a familiar face – a soldier I had seen before. I suddenly realised that this was the hard

hearted/minded soldier who had tortured me those years ago in the camp (detention centre). Not a moment had passed after this realisation, than the soldier went forward, he had a hard mind/heart you know and put himself forward without fear for things. He was subjected to a volley of LTTE bullets. He was shot like nothing I'd ever imagined (*hitanna bāri vidiyaṭa*). His body was riddled with bullets like a sieve (*penēre*)... That happened to him because of the things he did... Because I had good experiences and didn't do *pav* (wrongful actions that result in bad karma), I am now able to live ... like this today.

Kirihami makes links between the past and the present, and understands his present life through his past violent experiences. In line with Buddhist ethical teaching, he rationalises his survival of the Terror in terms of his abstinence from *pav vāḍa* – wrongful/immoral actions or 'sin', which result in bad *karma*. Put in a situation that necessitated *pav* (i.e., being in the army and having to kill) he attempts to mitigate or negate the consequences of bad *karma* through what appears to be a *prārthanā* (religious wish).

In his study on Buddhism entitled *Precept and Practice*, based in the rural highlands of Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon), Gombrich found *prārthanā* (which he defines as religious wish) to be a common practice in the everyday lives of Buddhists. Gombrich suggests that *prārthanā* arises from an emotional need, and comments, "to what extent *prārthanā* are made and to what end, I cannot say, as they are for the most part a private affair, nor need they be made out loud" (Gombrich 1971: 219). Although *prārthanā* appears to counter the natural law of *karma*, Gombrich suggests that it (along with certain other practices), steers clear of serious inconsistency with orthodoxy. He argues that while "the canonical theory of *karma* survives intact – cognitively; affectively its rigour is sometimes avoided" (1971: 243).

Kirihami seems to believe that by making a private *prārthanā* before committing the wrongful act of killing he can alter his *karma* and avoid its negative consequences. This appears to be a means through which he is able to come to terms and continue living with his own complicity in violence. Kirihami's story here appears to be in congruence with Keyes' (1983) argument about the prominence given to individual moral responsibility in popular theories of *karma* among Buddhists. Keyes compares this with popular Hindu theories of *karma* and contends that among Buddhists, "much greater emphasis is laid upon the moral responsibilities that one

assumes for one's actions than upon the constraints of karmic destiny, whereas among Hindus the emphasis is reversed" (1983: 19).

Kirihami's story also intimates some understanding of the important position given to the 'intent' that precedes an act according to Buddhist doctrine. The first and arguably most important Buddhist precept clearly defines intentionally killing a living being (human or animal) as being a wrongful act, which inevitably results in a negative karmic consequence for the agent. This is based on the belief that it would be impossible for one to engage in such immoral acts when virtuous mental states (e.g., compassion) exist in the mind (Gethin 2004). In the narrative above, Kirihami makes an effort to portray the intent that precedes his violence, as not being immoral by way of his *prārthanā*. In so doing, he denies moral responsibility for violence. Although he uses his experience in the armed forces to elaborate on this point, we may safely assume that he also implicitly refers to the violence he perpetrated during the *Bheeshanaya*. He substantiates his rationalisation by pointing to his ultimate survival against the odds.

Kirihami instead holds his former torturer accountable for the violence of the *Bheeshanaya*, and shows him to suffer the consequences of his immoral action. Kirihami imbues his former torturer with southern cultural traits, showing us the shared origins of his tormentor. A hard heart/mind and a characteristic of fearlessly putting oneself forward in the face of danger are common cultural traits popularly attributed to Sinhala people from the South, to emphasise features such as courage and bravery. By emphasising the hard mind/heart of his former torturer, Kirihami suggests that his torturer's wrongful actions were preceded by wrongful intent, invariably accumulating negative *karma*. On the other hand, Kirihami is keen to show that his own intent and accompanying *prārthanā*, which preceded killing was not wrongful and so would not result in negative karmic consequences for him. In other words, through an implicit representation of the moral self and righteous intentions underpinning his violent actions in the past, he intimates that he cannot be held morally responsible for violence, in the present.

Kirihami also categorises wrongful acts according to a hierarchy. The five basic precepts that every Buddhist must follow are that of not killing living beings, not stealing, not lying, not taking intoxicants (which cloud the mind and make one susceptible to breaking the other precepts), and not engaging in sexual misconduct. Kirihami shows his hard hearted/minded torturer to have broken two of the basic Buddhist precepts – that of abstaining from killing living beings and from taking

intoxicants. As a result, it is inevitable that the natural consequences of his immoral actions follow and his former torturer dies a horrible death - sudden violent death being the least desirable form of dying for Buddhists. Kirihami himself believes that his abstinence from what he classifies as *pav vāḍa* - wrongful action that accumulates negative *karma* (i.e., intentional murder during the *Bheeshanaya*), secured his own ultimate survival. In an environment in which torturers were not brought to justice, Kirihami wants to believe that retribution came forth in the form of the natural law of *karma*. Through this, he is able to come to terms with his past, and to restore a sense of moral order.

Kirihami's narrative throws up a chronological discrepancy, which is worth noting here. He talks about an incident involving the decapitation of 105 Muslims by the LTTE. This description fits the well-publicised murder of 105 Muslims who were praying at a mosque in Kattankudy, Batticaloa (in the East of Sri Lanka) by the LTTE. This incident took place on the 3rd of July 1990. In the following week, one hundred Muslims were killed in Eravur, also in Batticaloa, by the LTTE. However, despite the two events sharing similar features relating to place, and the numbers and ethnicities of people killed, Kirihami (by specifying the decapitation of 105 Muslims) seems to be referring to the Kattankudy massacre. The discrepancy in his narrative arises in the time that has passed between the *Bheeshanaya* and the Kattankudy massacre. While in reality, approximately a year (if at all) stood between the two events, Kirihami allocates the passing of 'years' to the temporal space between the *Bheeshanaya* and the Kattankudy massacre.

Kirihami was one of my most trusted and reliable research participants, and this was clearly not a deliberate attempt to mislead me. How then are we to explain his confusing interpretation of time, which defies the neat logic of chronology as we understand it? Narratives are essentially 'meaning-making structures' through which people create and structure their experiences in order to make sense of them (Reissman 1993). We cannot take Kirihami's interpretation of time at face value. I have already mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, the striking 'present quality' to the voices of people telling stories of events that occurred almost 20 years ago. We have also seen through the various narratives of former insurgents, that there seems to be an immersion of the past in the present, and a collapsing of boundaries between an ordered sequential past, present, and future.

This particular incident attests to Langer's compelling argument that despite testimonies sounding chronological to us, those who have experienced violence and

who narrate them are “mental witnesses” as opposed to “temporal” ones. So they are “out of time” as they narrate their stories (1997: 55). Drawing on the testimonies of holocaust survivors, he goes on to show that for those who have had experience of violence, “time is durational as well as chronological” with the former being experienced continuously as a durational present (1997: 4). So we cannot expect Kirihami to offer us a specific chronology of events, based on the sequential order of time as we (who have not experienced violence) understand it. What was important for Kirihami was not the specific years that stood between the *Bheeshanaya* and the Kattankudy massacre, but the meaning of his experience of the event, and its expression.

Karmic Stories of Justice and Retribution

The need to believe that wrongdoers had been brought to justice was strong among people after the *Bheeshanaya*. Many ordinary people emphatically told me that those who had murdered their loved ones or those who had tortured them had come to some sort of harm. I was told numerous stories of former torturers being in car accidents, ending up paralysed, and being killed in a variety of horrific ways. When I asked people how they knew of this, they would often say that they had heard as much from trusted sources. The sense of frustration and anger brought on by the continuing lack of justice and official denial appears to have led people to draw on cultural models of ethics to appropriate moral responsibility for violence. These karmic stories clearly identified ‘perpetrators’ of violence and provided elaborate details of the specific karmic consequences they suffered as a result of their immoral acts, in the aftermath of the *Bheeshanaya*. Stories of karmic retribution further allowed people to restore a sense of justice and to re-imagine a moral community, destroyed by terror. In other words, the Buddhist ethical framework of *karma* provided people with a means of dealing with the ‘unfinished business’ of the *Bheeshanaya*. This was necessary for communities to carry on functioning in the aftermath of terror.

Mueggler (2001) has similarly shown how in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward and famine in China, people utilise stories of vengeful wild ghosts to distribute responsibility for violence and recreate an “agonistic sense of community in the face of their own shared responsibility for past violence” (2001: 97). He goes on

to persuasively argue that along with divination and healing rituals, this provided an ethics to deal with violence in daily life (2001: 33). Similarly, it is evident that for those who survived the *Bheeshanaya*, the Buddhist karmic framework provided a culturally appropriate model of ethics to give meaning to, and come to terms with, past violence. Moreover, it allowed people to grapple with the awkward task of appropriating moral responsibility for it, and to restore a sense of justice in the aftermath by holding wrongdoers to account.

These karmic stories further attest to Lambek's argument about the moral claims that memory entails. He notes that where history is denied, "the moral function of memory is to compel us to confront what we wish to leave behind" (1996: 61). In post-terror southern Sri Lanka, people kept the memory of the *Bheeshanaya* alive as an ethical issue and continued to grapple with the unreconciled past through these karmic stories. In the absence of any formal justice then, Buddhism and its law of *karma*, as well as giving meaning to their experiences of violence in the past, ensured that 'perpetrators' of violence were held to account in the present. Post-terror, Buddhism also kept a check on violence and prevented its escalation (in the form of revenge attacks), and further facilitated co-existence between various opposing sides.

In Chapter 2, we heard the story of Sheyanthi, the young woman whose mother was murdered, apparently by the JVP. The way in which she coped with and reconciled her traumatic experience was to understand it through a karmic framework. She told me that the murderer would never do well in life and later even mentioned that he had suffered terribly and subsequently died, due to the wrongful act committed. She also emphatically stated that she did not want to fill her own life with *pav* and for this reason even refused to give a description of the murderer to the police. If the natural law of cause and effect took care of punishing perpetrators of violence then, in the absence of formal justice there was no need to act violently to avenge the murder of loved ones.

Karmic Retribution in the Present Existence

It is interesting to note that when research participants told 'karmic stories' of people who had perpetrated violence during the *Bheeshanaya*, they unfailingly depicted the protagonists of their stories as being faced with karmic retribution within their present existence. In other words, in this instance, people overwhelmingly lay emphasis on negative *karma* coming to fruition *within* one's lifetime, as opposed to

ripening in subsequent lives. According to Theravada Buddhist teaching, *karma* broadly falls into 3 categories, based on the time of its maturation. In his discussion of karmic rebirth, King (1994) distinguishes between these types of *karma* by referring to Ven. Nyanatiloka's quotes from the Pali Canon: "Threefold ... is the fruit of *karma*: ripening during the (human) lifetime ... ripening in the next birth... ripening in later births" (1994: 2). Gombrich (1971) draws our attention to a fourth type of *karma*, based on his interviews with Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka, known as *ahosi karma*, which is *karma* that doesn't come to fruition as it is "superseded by the course of events" (1971: 214). By confining the ripening of negative *karma* within the wrong-doer's present life through their narratives, research participants appear to be referring to a specific category of *karma* known as *drstadharmavedaniya*, which yields results within the same existence in which the act was committed.

There are plenty of examples available in popular Buddhist ethical stories (*Jātaka* stories), which illustrate these different types of *karma*. One such well-known *Jātaka* story, which conveys the power of *karma* to ripen within one's present existence, is that of Cunda "the pig-killer". This story provides elaborate descriptions of Cunda, a pig-butcher, who falls violently sick, having frightening hallucinations of hell, crawling on his knees and writhing in pain, squealing and screaming like a pig - in effect being forced to endure a similar fate to the suffering he inflicted on pigs. Cunda here is clearly shown to suffer the karmic consequences of his immoral actions in his present existence. The story also intimates that he will go on to suffer the karmic consequences of his sinful acts in his future life as well (according to the *Jātaka* story, Cunda is then said to be reborn in *Avici* hell). The story ends with a moral lesson articulated by the Buddha as follows,

whether you be monks or laymen know this: if a man immerses himself in sinful acts like this man did, at the point of death he will say, 'I have done nothing good in my past life' ... Sinners suffer remorse in both worlds. (Obeyesekere 1991: 191-192)

The overwhelming majority of research participants would have undoubtedly been familiar with such stories (most likely from their childhood). People may have been inspired by these stories in their utilisation of *karma* to give a sense of moral meaning to their experiences of violence and to hold wrong-doers to account. The theory of *karma* is generally drawn on as an interpretive framework of meaning by Buddhists to explain and give meaning to certain existential dilemmas. As Keyes puts it:

to invoke karma when one is confronted with suffering about which one can do nothing but suffer, with injustice which one can do nothing to rectify, or with existential paradoxes that yield to no logical solution is to assert that there is an ultimate order within which these experiences are meaningful. (Keyes 1983:18)

In choosing to hook their karmic stories onto a specific category of *karma* that clearly demonstrates wrong-doers being held to account primarily within their present existence, research participants seem to be attempting to re-establish a sense of moral order in the face of un-reconciled violence. Where justice is not available through formal legal means and where it is not resorted to through other more informal or traditional means (e.g. through the spirit religion), people seek to institute a sense of moral justice through their specific interpretation of *karma* theory in this manner.

Living a Virtuous Life after Violence

While *karma* at one level may have functioned as a redemptive discourse, former insurgents eagerly expressed a commitment to living a virtuous Buddhist life after violence. This seemed to suggest new possibilities for ethical reparation, at the same time. Their narratives were characterised by the interpretation of their past and present lives through complex Buddhist teachings and elaborate examples of efforts to live in accordance with Buddhist ethics. Through this, former insurgents implied that they had learned important moral lessons from their violent pasts, and suggested a moral reformation of character in the present, as a result of this. Negotiating life after terror for ‘perpetrators’ appeared to entail not only grappling with appropriating moral responsibility for violence, but also an effort to respond to practical questions of how one ought to live for the self and for others in the aftermath (see Hallisey N.d.). Through their narratives, former insurgents drew on Buddhist doctrine to communicate specific virtues that were deemed a moral necessity for rebuilding life after violence, for the benefit of the self and others. The path was one of self-salvation, in line with Buddhist textual teachings, as opposed to seeking help from supernatural intermediaries such as gods. Refashioning the self in virtuous terms after terror allowed ‘perpetrators’ of violence to continue living with themselves and to alter their morally discomfiting relationship to the past.

In his study of the role of reading in cultivating the virtues of *satisampajannā* (moral discernment or prudence) and moral creativity in Buddhist ethical life,

Hallisey (N.d.) shows the interconnectedness of two contemporary ethical conceptions drawn from the modern West concerning the question: “How ought one live?”. On the one hand this entails considerations of living well with and for others, in line with the thinking of Ricoeur. On the other hand, Hallisey shows that it concerns one’s relationship to the self, referred to as “technologies of the self” by Foucault, in moral life. Hallisey argues that these two ethical conceptions have been studied as distinct entities too often. He makes a case for considering them in connection with each other by employing the Buddhist virtue of *satisampajannā* as an example, which he shows to entail both self-appraisal and the appraisal of others. His contention is that the notion of virtues applies to both these conceptions and that,

The desire to live well with and for others frequently provides both motive and guidance to those undertaking a wide range of practices of self-fashioning in any particular moral culture or ethical tradition. This is especially the case whenever these practices of self-fashioning presume and entail a critique of the self and a desire to become other than one discovers oneself to be. (Hallisey N.d.)

The former insurgents who participated in this research appear to tell us that rebuilding life after violence involves an ethical improvement of the self through self-salvation in line with Buddhist teachings, which inevitably impacts on one’s sociality with others. People drew on a range of colourful examples from their everyday lives, from the daily practice of the Buddhist meditation of compassion, to efforts directed at avoiding harm to animals, in order to demonstrate their commitment to Buddhist ethical practice for the moral improvement of one’s own character and through that their relationship with other living beings. Learning moral lessons from the past, which in turn resulted in a moral reformation of character through concerted efforts to lead a virtuous life implied an acknowledgement of the ethically troublesome nature of their violent past. But, this did not amount to an outright acceptance of moral culpability for violence.

Indeed this capacity for human beings to radically transform themselves is in itself fundamental to Buddhist teaching (see Deegalle 1997). This is perhaps best illustrated in the Buddhist ethical story of Angulimala, an infamous mass murderer

who lived during the time of the Buddha, whose moral and spiritual transformation after wrongdoing led to his ultimately attaining enlightenment. The story illustrates the redemptive power of Buddhism through compassion, based on the reformation of one's moral character in accordance with Buddhist ethics. However, it is important to note here that Angulimala's moral and spiritual transformation after violence did not negate the natural karmic consequences of his actions, but instead simply changed his response to it. Former insurgents' representations of their moral and spiritual transformation after wrongdoing and their acknowledgement of having to suffer the karmic consequences of their past in the present, bear striking similarity to this Buddhist ethical story. For 'perpetrators' of violence, learning a moral lesson from past wrongdoing, and transforming oneself by adhering to Buddhist ethics is depicted as being a crucial aspect of reconstructing life after violence. In other words, specific virtues drawn from Buddhist doctrinal teachings (e.g., compassion, non-violence, wisdom, meditation) are deemed a moral necessity for life after violence, for the self and for others (see Hallisey N.d.). In another sense, however, we may also interpret this representation of the morally transformed self as a narrative strategy deployed to reject accountability for violence. One may argue that by engaging in a refashioning of the self after violence, some people were in fact asserting a discontinuity of self-identity and distancing themselves from past misdemeanours (i.e., the virtuous Buddhist of today is not the violent insurgent of the past).

Senahami, an older ex-insurgent who participated in both insurrections frames his understanding of violence in Buddhist teachings. Like many other ex-insurgents I spoke to, he too believed that abstaining from specific wrongful acts during the Terror secured his survival. He continues to practise, and be guided by, Buddhism in his life after the *Bheeshanaya*.

My own understanding of revolution is the betterment of man (*minisā suvapat kirīma*). ... If you love mankind then you love animals and nature. Now I care greatly about nature and animals. We have a river with freshwater fish. I never catch them. I've built a ditch to prevent others from catching them. I always give animals food...I live by Buddha's teaching. A man who loves animals can never harm another human being. So the question then is 'how can one then take up weapons?' My answer to that is youthfulness (*tarunakama*)...I don't even eat fish. I am a good Buddhist. So that helped me. If you protect nature, then nature protects you. I never killed anyone. I didn't even punish and humiliate people. That's why I escaped the second time. I had to hide from the

party itself for some time. Because I tried to reason with the young (*taruna*) leaders at the time and opposed their moves to kill people. I tried to show them that if you punish a so-called traitor by killing him, then you upset his whole family and the whole village. So I helped a lot of people in that way. But for their youthfulness (*tarunakama*) they didn't understand that and didn't like being told so.

In reflecting on the violence of the *Bheeshanaya*, Senahami comes across a stumbling block in his attempts to understand it – that of Buddhists, who are meant to follow the Buddha's teaching on non-violence, taking up weapons. He explains this as a feature of 'youthfulness' (discussed in Chapter 1), which apparently clouds one's judgement and hinders the ability to abide by Buddhist ethics. Senahami has a clear understanding of what being a good Buddhist involves. He communicates specific Buddhist ethical values as being necessary for leading a virtuous life after terror. These include compassion and respect for life and the natural environment. He believes that adhering to the Buddha's teachings during the *Bheeshanaya* - not inflicting violence on others and acting with moral intent (i.e., participating in the insurrection for the betterment of humankind) ensured that negative karmic consequences did not follow him. As a result he was able to emerge alive from terror. He comprehends his survival of the *Bheeshanaya* through a Buddhist ethical framework, and through his narrative he conveys his innocence and rejects moral responsibility for violence.

Senahami told me that his interest in Buddhist philosophy intensified after his 'retirement' from insurrectionary activity. I often found him engrossed in Buddhist texts or on his way to the local temple. For many former insurgents like Senahami, this renewed faith in Buddhism was an important resource in the exercise of reconstructing their lives after violence. It provided guidance and a purpose in life after violence. His efforts to live a virtuous life formed an important aspect of learning to live with his violent past in the present. Senahami's representation of reformed moral character may also be interpreted as an implicit act of moral reparation, which further suggests an acknowledgement of the ethically troubling nature of his past actions.

Nikhil, the 'retired' insurgent who we met earlier in this chapter, emphasises a commitment to Buddhist textual teachings and highlights specific virtues as being necessary for 'being a good Buddhist'. These include virtues of compassion, non-

violence, meditation, and wisdom, which are important for living life for the self and others. Nikhil told me that after 56 years he had found Buddhism. He had begun studying Buddhist texts and meditating regularly following his release from detention. He smiled shyly and told me, “I’m not saying I know everything about it (Buddhism). But I have read a lot and I try to live my life by it”. His story emphasises a reformation of character following moral lessons learned from a violent past. Like the case of Senahami above, this too may intimate an engagement at some tacit level in moral reparation. His narrative is as follows.

Do you know that today, I can’t even bring myself to damage a Government (public) light bulb. The law of my human conscience (*mānava nītiya*) does not allow it. I damaged so much public property in those days, which I never had the right to do. We killed about 60,000 people and the other side killed the same. Through Buddhism I later learned these things. We were never taught the value of Buddhism in school. We just learned *gāthā* (Pali verses) and memorised precepts. But now I know *anitya* (impermanence/non-self), *dhukka* (suffering), and *samānya* (equal value of all life)...I know that we are just made up of atoms. But we get attached to things in this world. When we really understand the principle of non-self (non-ego) that we are merely made up of atoms and nothing is permanent, then we realise that nothing really belongs to me. So then there is no need for anger). From morning till night I try not to do anger (*vairaya*) to others, and every night I do maithree meditation (Buddhist meditation of compassion)... I love Buddhism. Now I have no desire for important positions, for more and more money, or for high status. Because of my understanding of Buddhism I know that all these things are a joke...In our country, Buddhism is practised only in name. Keeping up with the neighbour is a preoccupation for our people. And envy (*irisiyāva*) is everywhere. I know a little about Buddhism. But the majority of our people know even less about it. People don’t like it if another person does well... They follow the McDonalds culture and have a greed for the flesh of animals. These are not Buddhists. They may kill and claim to love Buddhism. But they don’t know what it is. I know that I suffered in jail (detention) because of the wrong acts I committed... I know that in my case, my *pav* is affecting me in this life. Even when things go wrong in my day-to-day life, I know that it is because of the *pav* I committed in the past. I comfort myself in that manner.

Nikhil actively draws on Buddhist teachings to understand his past, and perceives time as a continuation of the past into the present set within an ethical framework of the natural law of *karma*. He demonstrates knowledge of formal Buddhist philosophy and its complex concepts (e.g., non-ego, impermanence), which suggests that he has

committed time and effort to studying Buddhist philosophy. Nikhil suggests the reformation of his character to be the result of moral lessons learned from his violent experiences, and elaborates on his efforts to live a virtuous life in the aftermath. The project of reformulating everyday life after violence is guided by his interpretation of Buddhist ethics. He practices the Buddhist meditation of compassion daily (generally considered the antidote to violence), which helps him to deflect anger presumably towards his former torturers and those members of his community that ostracised him (as we saw in the previous chapter), and also to nurture this virtue within himself.⁴⁷ He further demonstrates the virtue of wisdom in recognising non-ego and the transient nature of the mundane world. His work to reformulate life after violence entails active efforts to reform his moral character from violent insurgent to compassionate and virtuous Buddhist, which is deemed necessary to live a moral life for the self and for others after violence. However, at the same time, Nikhil also indicates a discontinuation of the self through the emphasis he places on this moral transformation of his character (e.g., he says that he cannot bring himself to even damage a public light-bulb and compares this to the public property he destroyed during his life as an insurgent). In doing so, he distances himself from his violent acts and implicitly argues that he cannot be held morally accountable in the present, for his actions of the past.

Buddhism for Nikhil operates as a survival strategy, helping him to deal with the challenges posed to the work of reconstructing life after terror. He comes to terms with his past actions through an analysis of Buddhist teaching, and even blames the ineffectual way in which Buddhism is taught and disseminated in Sri Lanka for his own participation in violence during the *Bheeshanaya*. In the aftermath of violence, Nikhil shows his reclamation of the everyday to be centred on efforts to lead a virtuous Buddhist life and to bring about a moral refashioning of the self, based on lessons learned from his violent past. In doing so, he rejects moral responsibility for past violence, and makes his troublesome past (and himself) more tolerable to live with in the present.

⁴⁷ There is an interesting distinction between the ways in which ex-insurgents and those ‘victims’ of violence (as shown in existing literature) drew on religion in the aftermath of the *Bheeshanaya*. Former insurgents used religion in a manner that helped them to control and abate potentially violent emotions (e.g., anger, desires for revenge). On the other hand, ‘victims’ of violence who had lost loved ones during the *Bheeshanaya*, drew on the spirit religion or popular Buddhism for its “emotional appeal” (Douglas 1992) – in order to express powerful ‘negative’ emotions, as opposed to keeping them in check (see Perera 1995, 1998, 2001; Argenti-Pillen 2003).

Reflecting on Violent Deeds

A study centred on those involved in violence naturally begs the question of whether people regretted their actions. Was shame, guilt or even pride, expressed by those who had engaged in horrific acts of insurrectionary violence? My research rendered no easy and clear-cut answers to these complex and highly sensitive questions. Throughout this thesis we have found the narratives of those who have perpetrated violence to be ambiguous and contradictory, with both a refusal to accept moral responsibility for violence taking place alongside an apparent tacit acknowledgement of it. This research has found memories of violence to be mediated in ethical terms by those who have engaged in it. Selective and altered remembering, disassociation and deflection, avoidance, denial, and amnesia, which have been shown to mark the testimonies of ‘perpetrators’ of violence in other contexts (see Browning 2001, Payne 2008, Foster et al. 2005), also smudged the narratives of those ex-insurgents who participated in this research. Some offered vague and ambiguous responses to my gentle probes on their direct involvement in violence during the Terror. The majority avoided this sensitive issue altogether, with their narratives verging on the incoherent when it came to their own perpetration of specific violent acts. This overall suggests a sense of moral discomfort attached to these memories as substantiated by efforts to morally justify their own involvement in the insurrection and to retrospectively refashion memories of the self in ethical terms, as we have seen throughout this thesis.

One man remembered himself as being the altruistic and popular JVP insurgent of his village during the *Bheeshanaya*, who was well liked by neighbours. He told me that he protected the lives of many people in his village and that neighbours would often come to him for help during the Terror. Conversely, however, two of his neighbours described him to me as a dangerous (*darunu*) man feared by those in the village; a man who had exploited the power given to him by “the gun”. His co-villagers were apparently relieved when this former insurgent was taken into detention by the counter-insurrectionary forces. This is a clear example of altered remembering charged through with ethical undertones. Through this retelling of the past, the former insurgent in question attempts to alter his experience of that unsettling past in order to continue living with his violent acts in the present.

Those most vociferous in denying past violence (i.e., their own violence and that of the JVP overall) were former insurgents who remained active supporters of the

JVP during the time of their participation in this research. After significant trust had been built over time between ex-insurgents and myself, those who were no longer involved in the JVP began to volunteer snippets of personal information about their various ‘misdemeanours’ from the *Bheeshanaya* era. These ranged from the destruction of public property, to extortion and threatening people at gunpoint. However, they denied culpability for those acts of violence they categorised as being more heinous (i.e., murder and physical assault). In some cases this ran contrary to quiet anecdotal evidence (usually given to me by neighbours or our ‘go-between’), and I often felt that I was being presented with sanitised versions of individual pasts. Some ex-insurgents are likely to have believed that talking to me about committing those violent deeds, which they perceived as having higher stakes (e.g., murder, physical assault), would result in frightening consequences for them. A sense of moral discomfort and concern about their own reputation and social standing, are likely to have further contributed to their reluctance to broach this issue. In the case of those former insurgents who continued to support the JVP, their over-enthusiastic denial of individual violence and that of the JVP was a protective strategy, employed to safeguard their image. Denial may also have functioned as a coping mechanism necessary to continue unhindered the intricate work of rebuilding social worlds after terror. However, denial (while for some it signified a sense of moral discomfort with their complicity in violence) did not necessarily indicate regret. The majority of former insurgents (particularly those who continued to support the JVP) offered various ethical justifications for the necessity of violence (often hypothetical violence in the case of those who denied that violence took place at all on the part of the JVP), thereby suggesting a refusal to accept moral culpability.

Let’s now turn to Tilak. We may remember from earlier that as an insurgent Tilak spent several years being tortured in detention and was accused of murder during the *Bheeshanaya*, which he denied to me (despite our ‘go-between’ privately telling me otherwise). Following his release from detention he went about re-organising the JVP and continues to be a staunch supporter. This section of our interview was the result of some gentle probing on my part, and followed his lengthy description of torture in detention and denial of violence being used by insurgents.

Tilak: The JVP didn't murder people. The Government killed 100 thousand people. Their actions were blamed on the JVP. The JVP did not engage in violence (*aparāda*). In any revolutionary organisation, if someone is a grass who hinders your goals, they are a traitor, and they must inevitably be removed (*ahak karanna*). But the JVP didn't murder people. We were never taught to murder people. We had to go forward together with the people. Others used us as scapegoats for murders they committed. Like the army captain. Yes, the army gang that went everywhere identifying themselves as JVP and using the names of JVP boys, including my name. We didn't burn buses, or raid co-ops. We held *virōdi* days (protests/strikes) because we needed to let the country know what we were doing. But on those days the army did various things to change that (stumbles, incoherent)... and do their own things and blame us.

Me: I personally know people who lost family members to JVP violence and who were forced to go on anti-Government protests threatened at gunpoint.

Tilak: Yes there may have been some over-sight (*aḍu pāḍu*) on our part too. Some (insurgents) raided the co-op through sheer hunger, because that is a public resource belonging to the people isn't it. The leaders lost control of the people...Many uneducated young people just joined (the JVP) with the *rālla* (herd), and didn't get the party education. Then, these people may have done whatever they wanted.

Tilak's narrative is riddled with conflicting statements, and he flits between denial and attempts at justifying insurrectionary violence. He clearly states that JVP insurgents did not commit murder, extort from co-ops, or set buses alight.⁴⁸ However, he then goes on to comment on "traitors" being "removed" by the JVP and insurgents raiding co-ops "out of hunger". On being probed, he uses euphemisms and chooses language that offers a watered-down version of the violence committed by insurgents. Tilak uses the word "remove" instead of "murder", and "oversight" to denote violence. This need to sanitise and justify violence suggests that Tilak feels a sense of moral discomfort on the subject of his complicity in violence. Denial, disassociation, and a deflection of blame on to others (i.e., 'uneducated' young recruits) feature throughout his narrative, which comes across overall as an attempt to avoid moral responsibility for violence.

It is interesting to note that up to this point in the interview Tilak reflected on, and spoke of his experiences during the *Bheeshanaya* as an individual, using the term "I". However, when it comes to the awkward issue of culpability, he speaks in terms of a collective 'we'; a term which encompasses himself, his insurgent peers, and the

⁴⁸ These were among the most common and well-known acts of violence committed by the JVP.

JVP organisation as a whole, thereby sharing the burden of responsibility. This suggests some defensiveness and a sense of unease about these particular issues. His justification of violence and denial on behalf of the collective ‘we’ are of a protective nature, which attempts to convey his own ‘innocence’ and to safeguard the reputation of the JVP leadership.

In Payne’s (2008) study of the testimonies of ‘perpetrators’ of violence to South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, we can see some parallels in the way people talked about their own culpability when it came to violence. Her research illustrates their tendencies to block memories, disassociate themselves from their violent acts, and to find ways of justifying and explaining violence. She contends that very few ‘perpetrators’ accept responsibility for past violence, and that those who do so rarely consider their acts wrong or evil. It is evident from her study that ‘perpetrators’ of violence tend only to admit to a sanitised version of the past, providing us with “partial truths, fictions, and lies” (2008: 263-266). In the case of those former JVP insurgents who admitted having committed ‘mild’ acts of insurrectionary violence to me (and even these usually preceded by altruistic motives), only a handful expressed regret at their actions. And even here, this was largely due to the perceived negative consequences that their past ‘misdeeds’ had on their life in the present (e.g., bad *karma* in their present life, disruption of education and with it their future prospects), rather than remorse over the harm they had caused to their ‘victims’. Those former insurgents who continued to avidly support the JVP showed the least remorse and often strongly justified any violence that may have been carried out on the part of insurgents.⁴⁹

We will now consider Vijitha’s story. He, like Tilak, was a politically active supporter of the JVP during the time of his participation in this research. I met Vijitha through a chain of mutual friends. He was a friend of a friend of a friend. A consequence of this was that I was not equipped with any information about him prior to my visit to his house, which was situated in a notoriously ‘rough’ area. I had made it a point to generally gather as much information as possible from ‘go-betweens’ about potential research-participants prior to meeting them, following a couple of unpleasant interviews with some rather dubious people who made me fear for my safety, during my early days in the field.

⁴⁹ Their eagerness to deny violence committed by themselves or by the JVP led to contradictions at various points in their stories, which often left me rather confused.

As I entered the dark and cramped house to meet this slim but strong and upright man in his late 30s, all I knew of him was that he had been a JVP insurgent in the 1980s. Vijitha is one of my most memorable research-participants simply because he was possibly one of the most disturbing people I have had a one-to-one interview with. Vijitha's voice was stern and his mannerisms, spine-chillingly cold. His hard and direct gaze into my eyes was broken only once during the interview, when we heard a noise outside. My interview notes observe that the hairs on the back of my neck remained prickled throughout my interview with him, and that sheer relief swept over me upon leaving his presence. An extract of his interview is as follows:

I tell (you) truthfully that I have not even killed one person. The party (JVP) never asked me to. If I was asked, I would. I am aware of the consequence of my actions as a Buddhist, the *pav* (negative *karma*) and hell (*apāya*) that will follow. But I wouldn't let the party down. Out of the love for my country. If I had followed the other path (Buddhism), then I would have taken up robes and be working towards gaining *nibbana* (*nirvāna*)⁵⁰ ...I wasn't put in a situation where I had to kill. If I am given a gun now I will kill. The party would not tell me to kill normal people. The person I'd have to kill would be the enemy, someone who would cause harm to the party and society. If I think 'pav' and dither about whether I should or not kill, then in that time the enemy would have killed me already. It is my duty. In the *Bheeshanaya* we were soldiers... Soldiers must take firm decisions. It's as if we are having a debate. The climax of our heated debate here is the shooting.

Vijitha not only sees violence as a necessity, but also as obligatory (he states it to be his 'duty'). He justifies its perpetration in moralistic and militaristic terms. The positive end result of violence (and thereby its honourable motivations), which is the abating of harm to the JVP and society, overrides its negative karmic consequences. He sees the role of the guerrilla insurgent as that of a soldier, with responsibilities that naturally include perpetrating violence and killing 'the enemy'. His justification of violence, based on it being inflicted on 'the enemy' as opposed to those he classifies as 'normal people' may appear somewhat bizarre to us. This distinction allows him to construe violence as a necessity, as unproblematic, and justified due to its altruistic aims (to protect humanity). Vijitha, like many other ex-insurgents, constructs the

⁵⁰ *Nibbana* is the Pali word for nirvana, which means enlightenment, extinction, or liberation from rebirth – the ultimate goal for Buddhists.

image of the 'JVP insurgent' as a martyr, imbued with altruistic qualities such as that of selfless sacrifice for the benefit of humanity. It is worth taking note here of Mahmood's warning that "without understanding that from the viewpoint of most guerrilla fighters, what they are doing is the pinnacle not of inhumanity but of humanity, we will never be able to effectively grapple with the problem of insurgent violence" (2000: 7).

Allied to remembering the motives of their actions in altruistic terms, followed the response from many former insurgents that they had no regrets about their involvement in insurrectionary activity. I was commonly told that the sacrifices they had made and the suffering they endured during the *Bheeshanaya*, had paved the way for improvements in society. Spaces for democracy and employment opportunities in rural areas being created were often cited as such improvements. Remembering their past violence as being underpinned by morally righteous motives, enabled former insurgents to continue living with unsettling memories of their own violent actions, in the present. Conversely, some former insurgents (particularly those who were not supporters of the JVP during the time of their participation in this research) admitted regret, mainly concerning the continuing negative impact that their violent past had on their present lives. Some stated the insurrection and their involvement in it to have been a futile project, which achieved little despite its honourable aims.

Every one of my ex-insurgent research participants nevertheless, affirmed that positive benefits in terms of personal development had been an important outcome of their insurgent past. Those traits most commonly cited were increased political and social education or awareness; strength to face challenges that life throws at them; alertness and sensitivity to changes in their environment; forbearance; and the ability to face death without fear. I have set out below three responses of former insurgents to my questions on whether they had any regrets about their involvement in the insurrection. What is striking about their responses is the moral undercurrent that runs through the rationalisations they offer for their involvement in the insurgency, and with it the refusal to accept moral responsibility for it. Moreover, through their narratives these former insurgents clearly assert a lack of regret. Their emphasis of the positive outcomes of their violent experiences for society and the self, seem necessary for the recreation of sociality after terror, under the shadow of violence.

Tilak [continues to actively support of JVP]: Regrets? (*pasu tāvili*) [sounds incredulous, laughs]. No! I was an FT (full-time) for 10 years. I feel a great sense of happiness (*loku satutak*) when I now see a protest or campaign because I feel happy that I played a part in paving the way for that. By suffering... we enabled people to protest freely. We uplifted society (*samājaya goḍa nagāgatta*).

Vijitha [continues to actively support JVP]: I have no regrets [voice firm]. Because ... I am a stronger person as a result of what I have learned from my experiences, and I can face up to life without any fear. No matter how little money I have, I managed to be victorious in life. No matter what decision I take, even if it is wrong I don't retract...I see people who are only focussed on the present and are totally unaware of what is going on around them. They aren't aware of earthquakes and volcanoes around them. These are the people who should have been taken away by the (2004 Asian) Tsunami. Because they are of no use to society or the future of the country.

Kirihami [does not support the JVP]: Looking back ...it was my life's most significant experience. I learned a lot from that. If not for my involvement (in the insurrection)... I would not be as well read...the JVP forced us to read...This hugely helped in developing/uplifting my life. Because I read and developed my knowledge and understanding, I went down the correct path. I avoided vices like getting involved in drugs or the underworld...I have no regrets at all about that period...those experiences gave me a lot of strength...I have so much knowledge and understanding about politics and society. I notice that even today when I speak to people of my generation. They have no understanding or awareness about politics or society.

Perera (2001) in his work on ghost-stories in the immediate aftermath of the *Bheeshanaya*, refers to a sense of “community guilt” that arose from the violence of the Terror. However, he fails to adequately substantiate these claims (e.g., he doesn't provide evidence of this through people's narratives), and simply suggests that the sighting of ghosts in specific spaces in which violence took place (as reported in newspapers) emanate from a sense of community-guilt. Ghost-stories relating to sites of violence from the Terror were markedly absent during my research, as mentioned earlier. However, my research did find that a small number of individuals who were involved in the violence of the *Bheeshanaya* felt a sense of guilt and remorse. In Kanchana, whose story is set out below, we find a former-insurgent who seems to suffer what can only be described as ‘survivor's guilt’. Following the development of significant trust between Kanchana and myself over several months, he revealed to me the following, with a troubled expression.

You know, I remember that time a lot now. When I meet others who were also involved in the insurrection. I naturally/instantly (*shanikava*) remember it at weddings and funerals and events like that. At weddings we talk about our friends from that time. Those who died, and we feel sad about them not being here with us to share this happiness [pauses, gets upset]. Sad about not being able to go to their weddings. I feel great sadness (*tada kanagāṭuva*) when I see their children. The families of those killed were left destitute and have suffered a lot. Due to poverty and hardship many of their children had to be brought up by relatives and grandparents. It was a useless thing that happened. Those poor, innocent little children (*ahinsaka poḍi daruvō*) now live a life of suffering because of what we did.

I found listening to Kanchana's words emotionally upsetting. His eyes were clouded with tears, and his voice filled with a genuine sense of remorse and sadness. Kanchana feels a sense of personal responsibility for the consequences of the collective violence of the *Bheeshanaya*. He is acutely aware of the destructive legacy of past violence and its impact on future generations. Memories of loss and devastation linger continuously beneath the surface of the everyday, of the present and the future (e.g., in the form of future generations). Past violence rears its head to the surface during ordinary life events such as weddings and funerals, when communities are brought together, and where Kanchana must come face to face with the consequences of his past (i.e., in the form of his dead comrades' children). For Kanchana, reconstructing life after terror is not about 'leaving the past behind'. It is about learning to survive and live with the past continuously through the present and the future. And it is about reflecting on, understanding, and finding ways to come to terms with it, while reclaiming an altered everyday that continues to be shaped by violence. As Langer puts it, "life after atrocity is not a call to new unity, but only a form of private and communal endurance, based on mutual toleration rather than mutual love" (1997: 63).

'Healing' and 'Getting Over' violence

Much of the research that has been carried out on survivors of violence is framed in therapeutic and cathartic terms of ‘healing’ (see Das 2007, Perera 1995, 1998, 1999, 2001). I am in agreement with Scheper-Hughes who comments that this master narrative of “healing” and “getting over” violence which emerged in the early 20th century is romanticism, conjuring up “biblical images of safe passage, of reaching the other side, and finally, of overcoming” (2004: 459). “Healing” also somewhat patronisingly implies violence to be an illness or pathological disease that is inflicted on hapless victims who are in need of a cure. This denies agency to those who have survived violence, and who actively undertake work to reconstruct their worlds in its aftermath – a task that is intrinsically agential.

My research found that the complex work of reconstructing lives after violence was not a simplistic matter of ‘healing’ or ‘getting over’ violence. None of my research-participants (those who had engaged in violence, those who had witnessed violence, nor those ‘victims’ of violence) spoke in ways that signified ‘healing’ from or ‘getting over’ violence, leaving it behind in some distant past. And they certainly did not appear to have been miraculously ‘cured’ of their past experiences. Their stories about reformulating life after violence were complex, fragmented, and unfinished (see Ross 2003a). When we consider that those who have witnessed violence experience time as duration, rather than a neat chronological sequence (as argued by Langer 1997 and discussed earlier), then it automatically follows that ‘past’ violence is not something that can be ‘left behind’ or ‘gotten over’ in the process of reconstructing lives. As Langer puts it, “the passage of time cannot appease durational memory” (1997: 57-58).

For ex-insurgents, recreating lives after violence was about acknowledging the past and coming to terms with it. It involved devising various strategies to continue living with past violence, and finding ways to recreate the self and one’s relationship with others under its constant shadow. Past violence continued to powerfully impinge on the present everyday through ethically charged memories. Life after violence for ex-insurgents then, involved the active mediation of these memories, the constant assigning and re-assigning of moral responsibility for violence, and the negotiation of everyday life in its midst. It was clear from people’s testimonies that the *Bheeshanaya* was an experience to be understood, learned from, and lived with in ethical terms, as opposed to a traumatic past to be healed, forgotten, forgiven or liberated from.

CONCLUSION

My thesis started out by asking how people remember and talk about Sri Lanka's *Bheeshanaya*, and has focussed primarily on the memories and narratives of those who were in some way involved in perpetrating violence during this period. Violence is remembered, given meaning, and lived with in the present, in ethical terms. As we have seen from the stories belonging to former insurgents and former state counter-insurrectionary officers, the mediation of violent memories is fundamentally an ethical exercise for 'perpetrators'. It entails a reconstruction of one's experiences in moral terms, in ways that enable 'perpetrators' to continue living with their unsettling pasts in the present. I have argued throughout this thesis that memories of violence are morally tendentious, rather than being abstract and objective recollections of a recorded past. Shaped by the changing socio-political and moral contexts of recall, memories of violence are continuously reworked in the present, with profound implications for notions of the self and sociality. As such, this thesis has substantiated and built on recent arguments put forward by eminent scholars of memory, particularly those concerning the moral and political claims that the practice of memory entails, and its relevance to the construction of self-identity and relationships with others (see Lambek 1996, Antze 1996, Kirmayer 1996).

I initially set out to gain an understanding of how people who have perpetrated horrific acts of violence understand, reflect on, and come to terms with, their troubling pasts and how they recreate life and social relationships in the aftermath. This thesis came about partly because of my original inability to make sense of how people like the ex-insurgents and former state counter-insurrectionary officers, whose voices run through the preceding pages, can perpetrate violence against their 'intimates' and people they know – neighbours, work colleagues, and even supposed friends. And then, carry on living everyday life in the present with their denouncers, torturers, with 'witnesses' and with those they victimised, beneath the shadow of violence and betrayal. In recent years anthropologists have done some remarkable work to enlighten us about people who inflict violence on 'the other', and have contributed significantly to our understanding of how 'victims' of violence recreate their lives in the aftermath. However, comparatively little research has been forthcoming on people who kill "those in one's own image" (Siegel 1998: 1), and even less so on how these

‘perpetrators’ reformulate their worlds after violence and deal with the social and material consequences of their actions. The paucity of ‘answers’ to these troubling questions prompted this study.

As such, this is an ethnography of the present constructed on the work of memory, rather than an attempt to recreate a historical account of the *Bheeshanaya*. I have already discussed (see Introduction) the problematic nature of attempting to piece-together the historical ‘truth’ of this event. The strength of this work lies in the prominent position given to individual stories and the rich empirical data that this gives rise to. It provides a convoluted and contradictory picture of the human experience of violence, from the unique perspectives of people who themselves engaged in it during Sri Lanka’s Terror. Their voices have for too long been ignored. By creating a space for their reflections on violence, ‘perpetrators’ here are positioned as critics in themselves and speak from an array of fluid subject positions, thereby highlighting the complex and ambivalent nature of the practice of memory itself (see Antze and Lambek 1996). Moreover, this fluidity of subject positions supports an important contention of this thesis, which is that the mutually exclusive categories of ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’, as customarily used in approaches to the study of violence, are misleading and not workable on the ground. As well as being rejected by protagonists themselves, these one-dimensional categories fail to reflect the ambiguities of violence and the complex diversity of human beings (see Levi 1988, Foster et al. 2005, West 2000).

The stories belonging to ‘perpetrators’ in this thesis carry strong moral undertones and contain careful representations of the self and one’s involvement in violence along these lines. Accountability for violence is overwhelmingly denied or deflected through the use of various narrative strategies, while at the same time complicity in wrongdoing is implicitly acknowledged in some instances. People’s engagement with memory and narrative overall involve efforts to find an ethical framework to deal with the unspeakable violence of the recent past. In a climate of fear, forgetting, and silence, this thesis has shown people to create spaces to engage in elaborate moral critiques on violence and to appropriate accountability for it in their narrative reconstructions. Through the work of memory, people shared specific ethical values and attempted to re-imagine a sense of moral community in the aftermath of terror. In other words, where justice and reconciliation were not forthcoming, through their engagement with memory people attempted to allocate an ethical space to an un-reconciled violence that was awkwardly ‘close to the bone’ (see Mueggler 2001). In

this climate then, life after violence involved a process of continuous moral evaluations. The narratives that run through this thesis suggest that the allocation of moral responsibility for past violence is in a constant state of flux and that the violence of the *Bheeshanaya* is never fully reconciled in the present.

This thesis is as much about how people give voice to unsettling memories, as it is about how they make sense of, and come to terms with, past violence. The first chapter for instance, showed people to creatively utilise narrative strategies to mediate their memories of violence. Here, former insurgents carefully structured their narratives around the idiom of ‘youthfulness’ (a category that they imbued with powerful meanings), in order to articulate ‘untellable’ stories of their complicity in violence. Those who ‘observed’ the Terror similarly framed their stories in this manner in a bid to rationalise the morally incomprehensible violence of their recent past. In a post-terror climate of silence, fear, and forgetting then, ‘youth’ appeared to function as a relatively safe repository for discomfiting (and dangerous) memories. Moreover, I have argued that through this narrative vehicle of ‘youthfulness’ former insurgents reconstructed an alternative narrative of the Terror that contributed to a more convoluted history of the *Bheeshanaya*.

The manipulation of this idiom further enabled former insurgents to intricately negotiate issues of culpability as they proceeded to disassociate and distance themselves from violence. While not denying outright their involvement in it, former insurgents at the same time refused to acknowledge moral responsibility for violence, thereby highlighting the contradictory nature of being human. Former insurgents also drew on the idiom of ‘youth’ to project a particular moral representation of themselves as honourable insurgents, which in turn allowed them to deflect blame (onto those they considered to be ‘immoral insurgent youth’). I argued that this narrative strategy provided people with a means of dealing with the consequences of their actions and allowed them to continue living with their violent pasts (and themselves), in the present.

The ‘personal’ motives that underpinned the violence of the *Bheeshanaya*, and in particular its perpetration between ‘intimates’, contributed to the morally burdensome nature of its memory, as discussed in Chapter 2. This rendered the act of mediating memory an ethical exercise. People used the idiom of ‘opportunistic’ violence to comment on the ways in which violence invades ‘intimate’ relationships, and to acknowledge the damage suffered by their communities as a result of the Terror. People also told stories of ‘intimate’ relationships that transcended the divisive

violence of the *Bheeshanaya*, as discussed in Chapter 5. Remembering social relationships that withstood the pressures of violence allowed people to re-imagine an ‘intimate’ community after violence. This was conducive to the function of sociality post-terror.

Issues concerning the articulation of violent and traumatic memories are arguably most evident in the torture narratives that featured in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 of this thesis. Scholars have overwhelmingly pointed to the inexpressibility of torture and problems associated with giving voice to pain (see Scarry 1985, Das 2007, Daniel 1996). This thesis has argued that torture is expressible. In those instances where violence appears to be verbally inexpressible, people draw on various alternative means of communication to express their memories of torture. We saw for instance, the ways in which former insurgents used the body and other (non-verbal) means of communication (e.g., drawings) to convey their experiences of torture. Both former counter-insurrectionary officers and survivors of torture also employed various narrative strategies, such as speaking in terms of the collective and in the third-person, for these purposes. For ex-insurgents in particular, the desire to have someone bear witness to their suffering and the moral significance afforded to the subject position of ‘victim’, made important the need to communicate their experiences of torture.

I have drawn on these narratives of torture in particular to emphasise one of the fundamental arguments proposed in this thesis. This is that, rather than being senseless or devoid of meaning (see Scarry 1985, Nordstrom 1995, Daniel 1996), for those who have been subjected to violence and significantly for those who have perpetrated it, violence carries meaning and moral resonance. This thesis further suggests that in the aftermath of violence, recreating life entails a process of ascribing powerful meanings (largely of an ethical nature) to one’s violent past through the negotiation of memory. In so doing, people attempt to substantiate and morally re-empower the self and construe their lives as being meaningful. What former insurgents who were subjected to torture by the state appeared to be telling us here was that there was a point to their traumatic experiences. In so attributing ethical significance and meaning to their pasts, people find ways of coming to terms with, and living with their violent experiences in the present. Where violence renders a discontinuity or fragmentation of the self, remembering one’s troublesome experiences in morally meaningful terms allows for a sense of continuity. People (both those who perpetrated torture and those who were subjected to it) remembered their experiences of torture in moral terms and as being rooted in ‘intimate’ social

worlds, which stands in stark contrast to the “hyper-individuating” nature of its experience as suggested by Daniel (1996). The infusion of torture with meaning by both those who perpetrated it and their victims was an important means through which people could continue to negotiate life in the present with the traumatic memories of their violent pasts. Another interesting feature that characterised the narrative reconstructions of ‘perpetrators’ throughout this thesis, but which was arguably best illustrated in the torture narratives, was the position of victimhood and moral high-ground that both former-insurgents and former state counter-insurrectionary officers vied for. This carried important implications for representations of the self and the appropriation of moral responsibility for violence.

I had begun my fieldwork with the naive assumption that the narratives of ‘perpetrators’ would, to some extent at least, reflectively acknowledge past wrongdoing and even perhaps express remorse or attrition. As my fieldwork progressed I grew increasingly confused and frustrated by the denial, refusal to acknowledge moral culpability, and tone of victimhood that marked their narratives. Moreover, ‘perpetrators’ took pains to represent themselves and their own past actions in positive moral terms. In other words, what I came across was a sort of reflective ‘white-washing’ of the self and one’s questionable past that was firmly anchored in the moral. ‘Perpetrators’ of violence offered a sanitised version of their past ‘misdeeds’, provided moral justifications for their involvement in violence, denied or deflected moral responsibility for it, took pains to represent themselves as honourable people (often drawing on religion for this purpose) with a highly developed sense of social and ethical conscience, and spoke overwhelmingly in frames of victim-hood. At the same time, it seemed to me that these efforts to remember their violent experiences from the position of a moral high-ground also intimated some underlying moral discomfort attached to their violent pasts.

This thesis finds that where one’s own personal history is marred by complicity in violence, there appears to be a more urgent need to re-create self-identity in terms of the good, in order to make the self (and one’s past) more tolerable to live with in the aftermath. What the ex-insurgents and former state counter-insurrectionary officers who participated in this research have shown us is that “memory ... enables us to creatively fashion ourselves, remembering one thing and not another, changing the stories we tell ourselves (and others) about ourselves” (Antze and Lambek 1996: xvi).

Re-imagining the self and one's past in moral terms, and attempting to find an ethical framework to make sense of past violence, and in particular to deal with the awkward issue of culpability, was an important aspect of recreating life after terror for the protagonists of this research. This process was to a large extent facilitated by an appeal to Buddhism, which as we have seen in this thesis, played a vital and complex role in the narratives belonging to 'perpetrators' of violence. People overwhelmingly gave meaning to their experiences of violence by interpreting it through a karmic lens. This allowed for lines of continuation to be drawn between the past and the present. In a post-terror environment of impunity and silence, *karma* further allowed the restoration of justice and a sense of moral order, thereby providing people with a means of dealing with the 'unfinished business' of the *Bheeshanaya*. Elaborate stories were provided by former insurgents about the horrific fates met by their torturers, and similarly others who had lost loved ones to violence also told of the justice meted out to perpetrators by the natural law of *karma*. I have argued that as well as providing an important means through which people could make sense of the morally incomprehensible violence of their recent past, these stories further ensured that in the absence of justice and reconciliation 'perpetrators' were held to account in the present. In the aftermath of the *Bheeshanaya*, Buddhism played an important role in preventing the further escalation of violence and went some way towards facilitating a fragile co-existence between various opposing sides.

Former insurgents' narratives were overall characterised by the interpretation of their past and present lives through complex Buddhist teachings. We came across numerous expressions of religious piety on the part of 'perpetrators'. Former insurgents were keen to portray themselves as virtuous Buddhists and represented their everyday lives after terror as being guided by religious ethics. We heard from ex-insurgents who took up the practice of meditation with vigour, adopted a vegetarian diet signifying an adherence to the Buddhist principle of non-violence, and threw themselves into the study of Buddhist philosophy, among other things. This raised a number of puzzling questions primarily concerning the issue of moral responsibility for violence. On the one hand, such efforts to represent the virtuous self conveyed reassurances of a reformed moral character, which we may in turn interpret as a step towards moral reparation and an acknowledgement of culpability or wrongdoing. However, on the other hand, we found ex-insurgents to also use this narrative strategy to assert a discontinuity of the self and to disassociate themselves from past violence, which amounts to a rejection of culpability.

Moreover, despite the range of narrative strategies that former insurgents drew on to reject moral responsibility for violence, some ‘perpetrators’ also explained the trials and tribulations they suffered in their present lives as being the negative karmic consequences resulting from their wrongful actions in the past. In so doing, they appeared to implicitly acknowledge culpability for their actions. However, at yet another level, *karma* also appeared to function in this manner as a redemptive discourse. By explaining that they were already being made to suffer the negative consequences of their past actions, former insurgents further intimated that there was no further need for them to engage in acts of moral repair in the aftermath.

Indeed we found that ex-insurgents placed an overwhelming emphasis on the practical and material aspects of rebuilding social relationships in the aftermath of the Terror, while largely ignoring personal acts of moral repair. Through their stories, former insurgents made clear that recreating life after violence for them was about getting on with the business of living - getting a job, supporting the family, taking on domestic responsibilities, interacting with neighbours, getting involved in village and temple activities, and learning to live among enemies, rather than seeking forgiveness and making amends. This diverges from the importance placed by some scholars on the necessity of moral reparation in the recovery of social relationships after wrongdoing (see Urban-Walker 2006, Griswald 2007). I have pointed out that this raises questions about notions of guilt and innocence and the appropriation of moral responsibility for violence. We may ask ourselves whether it is fair to expect former insurgents to accept moral culpability and engage in acts of ethical repair after violence when they do not perceive themselves as having engaged in any wrongdoing, when the boundaries between artificial categories such as ‘perpetrator’, ‘victim’, and ‘witness’ are blurred, and when memory remains a terrain that is politically and morally contested, and when there are a multiplicity of oppositional ‘truths’ in existence.

Interestingly, this research has also found some parallels between ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victims’ (as set out in existing studies) in their efforts to piece together their social worlds in the aftermath of violence (see Green 1999; Das 2007; Mehta and Chatterji 2001, Chatterji and Mehta 2007). For ‘perpetrators’ too reformulating life after violence is steeped in the mundane and the ordinary. This thesis has further shown former insurgents to be active agents who consciously put in place carefully thought out strategies to negotiate social life in a convoluted post-terror environment brimming with competing memories of violence and betrayal. We

have also seen the ways in which violence remains entangled in the ordinary post-*Bheeshanaya*, lingering continuously beneath the veneer of silence and forgetting, emerging to the surface of everyday sociality unexpectedly and under the most banal circumstances, such as during a chance meeting at the local bank, or at ordinary life-cycle events such as village funerals and weddings. This attests to arguments put forward by scholars on “the mutual absorption of violence and the ordinary” (Das 2007: 7). For those who have perpetrated violence, learning to continuously negotiate the challenges thrown in the path of their reconstruction efforts by these lingering memories forms an important aspect of recreating life after terror. This thesis argues that the complex work of recreating life after terror is not a simplistic matter of ‘moving on’ or being ‘healed’ from violence, but that of continuing to live with past violence in the present, and finding ways to recreate the self and sociality under its shadow. This is fundamentally an exercise that is steeped in the moral.

The stories that have featured in this thesis are unfinished ones. They belong to those who continue to grapple with the legacy of terror and its “blood memories” (Green 1999). This thesis provides a snapshot of a particular people, in a particular place and at a specific time. I have pointed to the dearth of research on those who perpetrate violence and in particular on how these people then continue to rebuild sociality in the aftermath. As such, comparative lines of enquiry by other researchers into this subject set in different sites and covering different populations, would contribute greatly to our anthropological knowledge base on violence. Moreover, comparative research focussed specifically on the *Bheeshanaya* involving former insurgents at a later point in time, as well as other ‘perpetrators’ (such as the elusive members of paramilitary and vigilante groups that operated during the time) would also enhance our understanding of how violence is given meaning and its consequences negotiated with over the course of time, along with alterations in patterns of memory work that take place with changes in context. I have also highlighted the absence of the female voice as being a limit of this research. This renders the experiences of women who have perpetrated violence a useful progression of this research. Furthermore, this thesis has raised many other questions, particularly concerning issues of ethics and responsibility for violence, which could benefit from further enquiry.

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